

# **I Can See For Miles and Miles**



**The Unique World-Views  
of  
Miles W. Mathis**  
VOLUME # 7

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**COMPILED - MAY 2025**

# **I Can See For Miles and Miles - The Unique World-View Of Miles W. Mathis - Compilation Volume # 7**

Miles Williams Mathis is an American artist, poet, writer, self-styled scientist, and conspiracy theorist. He subscribes to quite a number of conspiracy theories, usually by the effect of "X person faked their death", "Y event was a hoax/staged" or "Z is an intelligence asset". Mathis claims to have overturned almost all mathematics and science.

This volume is comprised of the earlier writings of Miles Mathis, the artist, not so much the conspiracy analyst, circa 2004 - 2008. These were posted as webpages, before he started posting in PDF (Portable Document Format). In this volume, he mainly rants about what a crock Modernism/Modern Art is, and rightfully so.

Also included are his 9-11 papers, which were posted as webpages.

Miles Williams Mathis - American painter, was born in Amarillo, Texas, is an anachronism, a romantic artist who feels he doesn't quite fit into the modern age. He describes his work as unabashedly unmodern and completely antithetical to the concerns of modern art. Mathis took great care to establish a link to the past in his art education. Using the now out of style method of copywork he learned techniques from the Old Masters he admires. But Mathis strives for more than technical skill in his work; he wants to create more than a literal or decorative rendering of a subject. He considers his work a personal expression of the aesthetic. For Mathis the human figure, more than any other subject, has the power to engage the viewer. He delights in the subtle play of light and shadow on reflective surfaces such as hair and skin to suggest mood. Over and over he can paint the same model, varying the experience by using pencil, pastel, watercolor, charcoal, and oil.

Over the years, Mathis has generated an enormous amount of material causing speculation that he is a frontman for a committee of underpaid lackeys churning out reams of "Mathis Papers" in the basement of the CIA's Langley HQ, to spread more confusion.

In any case, we find his suppositions spellbinding. Perhaps to be read for "informational/entertainment purposes only". . .???

Compiled May 2025

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# Personal Photo Album



I'm chewing modern art, even at 1



age 5, Lubbock

age 8, first horseback



Bruges, 2006, age 43



with my Gandalf stick, 2013, age 50



almost a hole in one, with my brother Mark, Oct 2016

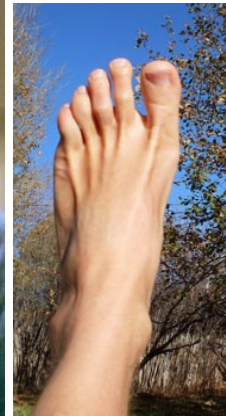




Taos, age 57



My niece, Kalyn



Bruges, Winter 2004    Upon first seeing Duchamp's *Bicycle Wheel*    my left foot



Weinstein Gallery, San Francisco, November 2003





my grandmother, 1926



my mom 1947



my great great uncle BF



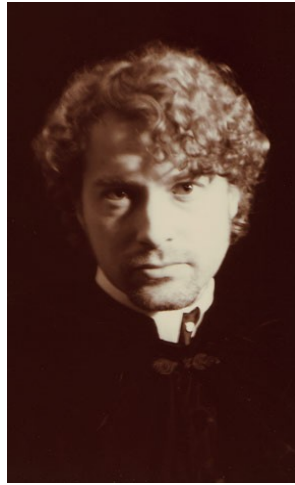
my great grandfather Maloy with his eight kids, around 1912



My parents, around 1960



California, 2023, age 60







four of my good friends in Bruges



Kayla 1983



Bonnie 2011



Vista Lane studio mugshots, Austin, Texas, 1999



Tess finds posing unbearably silly



Little brother wants to pose too



Florence, Italy, 1993



My favorite model Mary, 1988





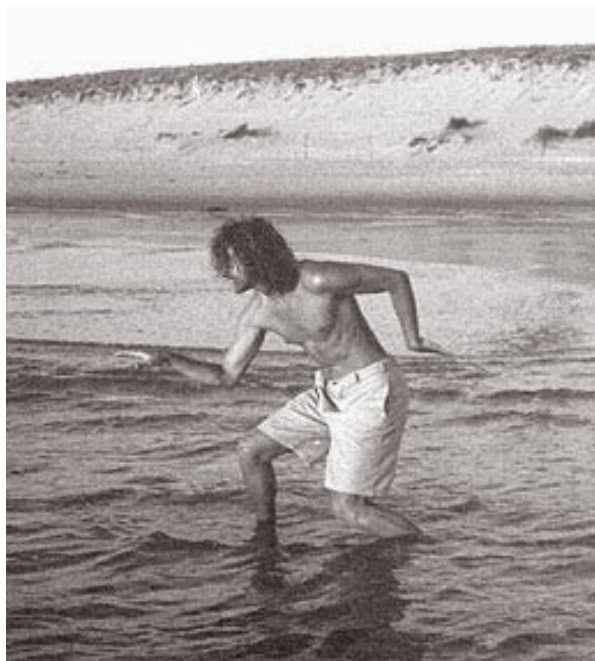
Austin Galleries One-Man Show, 1999







see, the beauty's lips really are that big Celeste  
Monica Hinojosa at 13



Horsing around in Montalivet, France, 1996



My friendly French photographers, Es. and Is.



Beach Volleyball Taos fall 2008



Taos, age 46





Taos, age 55



my birthday party, 2009, with Austin artist Anne Nelson Sweat



No, that's not Claire Forlani, that's me and Laura Alport,  
pretending to be puppies, apparently



Milo Bash IV, Austin, 1998, playing *Claire de Lune* sit up straight!



Greenhouse Gallery, San Antonio, 1995



From a photoshoot with Anne Nelson Sweat, 1993







Annika



My personal hair stylist and fashion consultant Fufu



With "Lethe" Sculpture, 1998



With painting model Faith Singer, 1997



An Amherst stunner



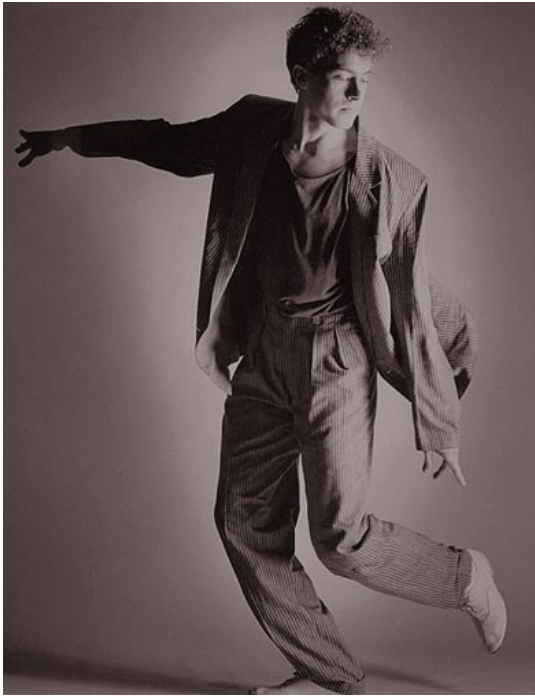
Taos, age 47



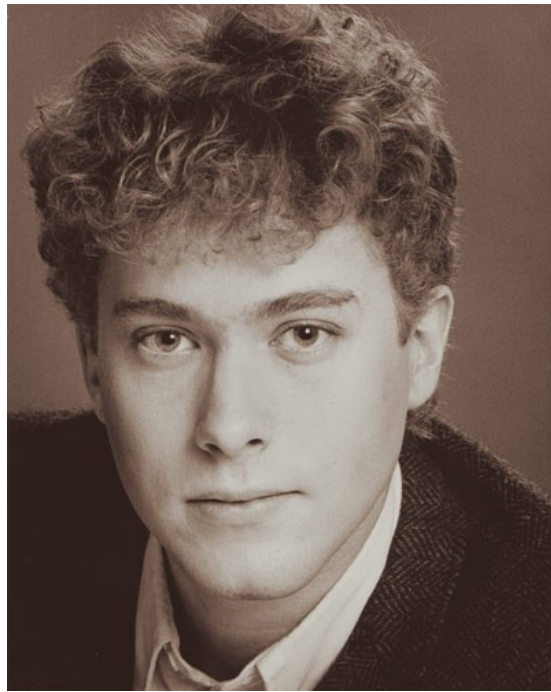
Not quite the expression I was looking for

that's better





My short life as a model/dancer



First (and only) headshot, 1983



With art maven Fran Scott, 1988



First big find, modelwise, Celeste



The Tuileries, Paris, Fall 1988



This is [Van Nielsen](#), my Guild Bro' from Texas.



with my girlfriend Gretchen and her father, Pitkin, CO 1971



The real me

# 911 Papers

***1. What I Wish David Ray Griffin had said to Amy Goodman.***

***2. Contra Penn Jillette.***

***3. A Reply to J.R. Dunn of American Thinker, by Laura Could***

***4. An Exchange with Noam Chomsky.***

***5. What Can I Do? A list of things you can do right now.***

***6. New Analysis of the Evan Fairbanks Video.***

***7. WTC TP Official Report of the Collapse of WTC7.***

## **1 - What I Wish David Ray Griffin had said to Amy Goodman**

In May of 2004, Amy Goodman had David Ray Griffin on DemocracyNOW! to discuss his book *The New Pearl Harbor*.

<http://www.democracynow.org/article.pl?sid=04/05/26/150221>

Also on the show was Chip Berlet, a political analyst who had written a critique of the book. Berlet doesn't manage to do much damage to Griffin. In fact, Goodman herself stings Berlet early on by asking him why fighter planes either weren't ready to scramble or weren't scrambled. Berlet is caught off-guard and has to invent the ridiculous answer that fighter jets were hours late because they can't hit top speed instantly.

But the turning point of the show was when Goodman asked Griffin if any experts in structural engineering agreed with him, concerning the collapse of WTC. Like Berlet, Griffin was caught off-guard by Goodman, and he couldn't name a single name.

Now, I don't mean to criticize Griffin here. Live interviews are difficult. I wouldn't want to have been there, trapped between two opponents. We all make mistakes and sometimes things are not going to go well. However, situations like that are the perfect opportunity to learn, and we need to learn how to debate each issue in this battle.

At first I thought the solution to this was to collect the names of experts and have all our interviewees memorize them, to answer this question in the future. But that isn't the rational answer here. This is the rational answer:

GOODMAN: Can you name an expert you have relied on, for example on the issue of the world trade center towers going down, an expert in structural engineering who has said it is impossible for the explanation to be the planes hit, and the fires caused the towers to go down?

GRIFFIN [hypothetical]: Are you implying that these questions should be decided by expert testimony, Amy? I had thought that, as citizens in a democracy, we were all presumed to be capable of reviewing evidence and making decisions. If not, then our jury system is highly flawed, not to mention our voting system. People who are prepared to accept expert testimony because it is from an expert don't need to read my book, or any book.

GOODMAN [hypothetical]: Well, but in instances like this, where much of the evidence is so technical. I mean, who of us knows what a 110-story building collapse should look like, with fires and planes?

GRIFFIN: Are you seriously suggesting that there are experts somewhere who have seen a lot of 110-story buildings collapse, after being hit by planes and engulfed by fires?

GOODMAN: I suppose not. But I think it is generally agreed that some people are more qualified than others to judge these matters. I wouldn't mind admitting that someone with a PhD in structural engineering knew more than me about buildings.

GRIFFIN: I don't mind admitting that either. But that is not the question. We are all on the same basic learning curve with this one, since all the PhD's in structural engineering are also out of their specialty and their depth here. They have to look at the same evidence we should be looking at, if all the evidence were on the table. Only a handful of people have actually built skyscrapers, and an even smaller handful have built structures that are anything like WTC 1 and 2. But these handful of people are not the ones making the official reports. The NIST and FEMA people are experts of a sort, but they have not built 110-story buildings any more than I have, or flown planes into them, or set them on fire. Besides that, a lot of these questions we are talking about are not in fact highly technical. They are evidential and logical. You don't have to know big equations to address them. You just have to be able to sort sense from nonsense.



This dodge into expert testimony is just that. A dodge. A lot of you guys and gals at DemocracyNOW! have bumperstickers that say “Question Authority!” Well, are we supposed to question the President’s authority but accept the authority of NIST and FEMA without blinking an eye? Are we supposed to let experts in structural engineering tell us what to think on this one?

In fact, you don’t get to be an expert in structural engineering by questioning authority. You earn the title “expert” by joining the status quo, going to work for the big companies and the big universities. Independent experts just don’t exist anymore. There are independent scholars, but none of them are called experts in the mainstream. It is not hard to figure out why. So it really shouldn’t be a big surprise that most “experts” are either accepting the official line or keeping quiet. Only experts in other countries are speaking out on 911, since they are shielded from our institutional hegemony. They are not put in the position of questioning their own government or their own employers.

GOODMAN: Could you name one of these foreign experts?

GRIFFIN: I could, but I am not going to. If the question really interests you, you can do a quick websearch and get thousands of hits. But if I did it for you, I would be undercutting my whole thesis here, which is that you are just as capable of viewing evidence as any experts, foreign or domestic. You would better spend your time by doing a websearch on a subject directly, rather than looking for some expert to explain that subject to you.

GOODMAN: But with the absence of much evidence, or its secrecy, it is difficult for most people to come to any conclusions without the use of expert testimony and official investigations. If we don’t accept the published conclusions, where does that leave us?

GRIFFIN: That is good point, and it is one of the main points of the Truth Movement. But rather than fall back on the easy answer, which is to allow ourselves to be spoonfed nonsensical information from the current administration and the stooges it hires, we should proceed to do the necessary investigation ourselves. You are right that a high percentage of the evidence has been destroyed or hidden or corrupted. But a surprisingly large amount of real information has survived, by oversight or incompetence. And we do have some real whistleblowers, some very brave people. That is where we have started. The JFK assassination had the Zapruder film and a pile of other evidence and anomalies. But 911 has a mountain of existing evidence, much of it irrefutable. You simply have to look at it for yourself. The Truth movement has been saying that from the beginning. We aren’t warning off anyone or telling them to trust us based on authority. We are saying, look at it and make your own decision. You are the authority. You have the right and the responsibility to see this information and judge it. Without looking at this information and digesting it and making a decision, you cannot hope to make an informed vote in the future, or to make any claim to being a useful democratic citizen. If you are

going to let experts tell you what to think, just because they are labeled experts by other experts, you might as well live in a *de facto* dictatorship—which is precisely where we are heading—or already are.

A long list of structural engineers and other experts now exists: you can [go here to read it](#).

## 2 - Contra Penn Jillette

Penn Jillette (of Penn and Teller fame) obviously considers himself a very smart person with a lot of courage. He is undeniably big and loud and obnoxious, and maybe in his own mind this is a suitable stand-in for courage. But it seems to me that a courageous debater on any of the contentious topics he has so publicly chosen to address would actually dare to come face-to-face or at least word-to-word with his opponent.

Instead, Jillette likes to do all his debating on camera, with just his little mime friend prancing about, and his real opponents a safe distance away off-camera.

Let me take as an example his video segment against 911 conspiracy theorists.

[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f-V1bXs\\_5Io](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f-V1bXs_5Io)

He leads with a lot of trash talk and then quickly graduates to arguing by emotion. That is to say, he tells the audience that about half of New Yorkers believe in the 911 conspiracy. A large percentage of Americans also believe in a JFK conspiracy. Many (the percentage is now dumped) also believe that we never landed on the Moon. “Are people just fucking stupid?” he asks. [This from a guy who is the illustrious graduate of Clown College. Seriously, check Wikipedia. I am not sure if that is considered to be more or less elite than refrigerator college.]

He has led with his conclusion, lumped a lot of issues together indiscriminately, and pre-defined his opposition as not even worth talking to. That turns out to be very convenient for him, since he never ends up talking to anyone he disagrees with or addressing any factual questions. Instead of engaging in conversation or debate, he shows little ten second clips and then makes sophomoric remarks about them.

Moving from trash talk to emotion, he shows the collapse of WTC2 and says that, “We should never have to see this again.” He says he is only showing it to us so that he can put to rest some crazy claims. But he doesn’t say *why* we shouldn’t have to see it ever again. He treats the audience like a bunch of weepy children who can’t face tragedy and shouldn’t have to. But this is just emotional misdirection.

In fact Jillette is reinforcing the official desired event-reaction, which is the look-away reaction. This is the desired reaction, since, while seeming to offer sympathy for the victims and for the gravity of the event, what it really does is prevent analysis. You shouldn’t have to look at it, because if you do you may eventually notice that it looks very strange. It doesn’t look like a falling building should look.

But Jillette diverts the audience from that possibility very quickly. He cuts to the retired fire-chief Dan Daily, who is here to tell us that all analysis of the event is “an insult to those who died.” More emotionalism, that is. Jillette introduces Daily with honey in his voice. He switches from saying “bullshit” every other word to speaking with softness and deference. We only lack violins in the background.

What Jillette doesn’t tell you is that a majority of firemen in New York City disagree with Chief Dan. Jillette doesn’t bother to interview any of the firemen who are angry, who have been treated like garbage by Guiliani and Bush, who have published many controversial things in their trade magazines, and who believe that explosives were set in the buildings. I guess he believes we shouldn’t have to hear that.

Finally Jillette gets to the “meat” of the video segment, which is a couple of short clips of Jimmy Walter and Eric Hufschmid\*. Admittedly, these two guys aren’t very photogenic. Or, they are about as photogenic as Jillette himself, but not nearly as loud. Although they are heroes of the Truth movement in many ways, Walter and Hufschmid are better behind the camera than in front of it (a fact they would readily admit, I imagine). Jillette chose these dregs of his interviews in order to make all 911 questioners look goofy. But this is a really cowardly method. I could dig up some people who agree with Jillette, catch them on a bad hair day with a cold, edit in the worst few seconds of their interviews, and run that as proof that only geeks agree with Jillette. Would I have therefore scored any points? Of course not.

Not only is Jillette basically dishonest, he is also wildly inconsistent. As proof, I take these three quotes of his from an AskMen.com interview.

As much as the population of the United States is blind, there is a very strong sense that we like to hear people out.

**You are supposed to hear from people you disagree with.**

**The major reason [narrow-minded] people are telling people to shut up is so other people don't argue with them, so they don't have to accept the fact that they are wrong.**

Now go to his 911 video with those quotes in mind. Does Jillette impress you as someone who likes to hear people out? Only if “hearing them out” means taping them, editing them into gibberish and then adding snide one-liners later.

If Jillette were really smart and brave, he would interview or debate Webster Tarpley, or at least, say, Ed Begley. People who are used to being on camera and who can speak with ease. He would argue substantive issues, avoiding emotionalism, *ad hominem* remarks, debating tricks, and snide post-commentary. That is what a real debate is about. It is not about your strongest man against my weakest man. It is about your strongest man against my strongest man. A strong man is not afraid to fight on even ground. But Jillette prefers to be a bully, a hulking loudmouth who only picks on the weak. And he can't even talk to *them* like a real man. He has to add his comments later, possibly to avoid getting thrashed by someone half his size.

Jillette is so unbelievably vile he finds it amusing to suggest to his audience that they push people they disagree with "down a flight of stairs." So much for hearing people out. He says that if a person is carrying a 911 conspiracy book, you should treat them with prejudicial contempt and violence. Yes indeed, don't read the book and dismiss it for factual or logical reasons. No, burn the book before you are tempted to read it, and attack the carrier for tempting you. The rational recommendations of a "vocal atheist." Interesting to see that the atheist Jillette can be just as illogical, exclamatory and obnoxious as the various deluded deists he loves to slander. It would appear that atheism is no guarantee of an open mind, or a well-functioning one.

\*Unfortunately, Hufschmid has since gone off the deep end. I recently emailed him to ask a simple question and he responded by asking if I were a Jew and quoting Mel Gibson. Hufschmid has crossed far over that line between questioning the nastier manifestations of Zionism, as Norman Finkelstein does, and being a frothing racist. It would appear that Hufschmid left cogent analysis far behind several years ago, in favor of delusional paranoia.

### **3 - J. R. Dunn: Neo-Pettifogger**

**By Laura Could**

In a recent issue of *American Thinker*, James Fetzer entered a short and nasty debate with J. R. Dunn on the subject of 911. Actually, only Dunn was nasty. Fetzer tried to debate by presenting evidence, but Dunn wasn't much interested in evidence. He was interested in sophistry. That is, he wanted to win the debate, at whatever cost.

In some minds, no doubt, he did that. Dunn is a cunning writer and a vicious debater, and he scored many below-the-belt pseudo-points according to the Ultimate Fighting handbook. Unfortunately, a deeper analysis will show that he lost, since his few substantive points hold no water.

To show this, I will closely analyze his final response in the debate. I will show that a large percentage of his output here is *ad hominem*. The rest is either misdirection or false statement.

Dunn begins his response by smugly telling us that he had set certain conditions to further argument. Among other things, he wants "logical, succinct, and coherent analysis of every statement I have made here, and in my article as well, following the example I have given you." As if that isn't fascist



enough, he also wants "fully researched answers." In other words, he wants Fetzer to spend all his time on the defense, chasing after Dunn's created ghosts and seeking sources. This is a classic debating feint. Of course Fetzer could have said the same thing: "No, Dunn, I want *you* on the defensive all the time, making no points of your own, only responding to what I have said, and footnoting every word and punctuation mark." Debaters will often be found pushing that plan, though few are as transparent as Dunn. As you can see, a strategy is not as effective when it is stated in bold letters. Normally the trick is to put your opponent on the defensive without letting him or the audience in on the trick. Being caught barking orders at your debating opponent is bad form, if nothing else.

What is happening is that Fetzer had made the mistake of footnoting his assertions in an editorial response (as proof, I suppose, that Dunn had not read any of the 9/11 material). It is hardly necessary to do this in the first place, but Dunn saw his opportunity. Dunn now demands that everything be footnoted, and warns that the footnotes must pass the strictest scrutiny. Notice that on his side, Dunn does not bother to footnote anything or provide any sort of references from any sources, great or small. He provides a few links which he implies support him, but they are not links to the Encyclopedia Britannica or the Library of Congress or *The New York Times*, they are just links to other opinion writers at other sophistic rags like *MacLeans*. For instance, if you take his link to *MacLeans* to see one of Fetzer's sources A. K. Dewdney "being ripped up, down, and sideways" by Mark Steyn, you find no such thing. You find Dewdney being attacked because he is Canadian, Canadians in general being attacked for being Canadian, and other very pertinent points of that sort. Dunn's article has ten times the apparent substance of Steyn's, and is far nastier, so that his calling Steyn the master is only false humility. Dunn is much better at drawing blood and much better at disguising his lies, and Steyn should sit at his feet.

It is also worth pointing out, before I continue, that Dunn is not succinct. Fetzer's letter is longish, but Dunn's response is even longer. You don't need to count words, just look at the position of the scrollbar when you hit Dunn's first word.

Dunn next spends several paragraphs showing that Fetzer did not do what he was told and chase Dunn's ghosts to their bitter end, with footnotes linking directly to God. Dunn tells us this means that Fetzer has admitted defeat on those points: "silence is acquiescence." Well, no, silence means that you are trying to spend some time on offense, putting evidence on the table, instead of endlessly debating defensive non-points like whether the term "the aerodynamics of flight" is redundant (Dunn thinks this is worth discussing at some length).

Dunn says outright that any points that Fetzer failed to address in his letter score immediately to him. "If the Endowed Chair can't answer those points, he has to accept them." I don't believe I have ever witnessed such ham-handed debating tricks. Dunn does everything but give Fetzer a wedgie and tell him he has a spot on his shirt.

Dunn would obviously have preferred it if they could have wasted their whole time on the semantics of a couple of sentences of Danielle O'Brien, since he is prepared to insert doubt into even the most straightforward things. He does this even when he can't find a way to look good doing it. For instance, he is foolish enough to pursue into a second round a topic that Fetzer *did* think it worth continuing, that of a commercial jet flying so close to the ground at the speed claimed by the official report. Although

Dunn lost the first round, and must have been seen to lose it by every qualified reader—especially the aerodynamics experts he likes to quote—he is undeterred. His sophistic confidence is bulletproof. He uses the example of a cropduster to counter Fetzner's point that the proposed jet was not *landing* at the Pentagon, it was crashing—supposedly at a speed much higher than landing speed. Dunn's cropduster is supposed to show us that planes can fly close to the ground. But what aerodynamics expert is Dunn impressing with that analogy? Cropdusters don't normally fly at 500mph and don't normally have a wingspan of 125 ft. They are close to the ground precisely because they are little and going slow.

But Dunn has the debating confidence to deflect this kind of thing almost forever, at least in his own mind. If he gets in a tight spot he can always attack someone's name (Dunn finds a key piece of information in this debate to be the fact that Dewdney's middle name is Native American in origin).

As another sample of misdirection, Dunn gives us the link to an F4 Phantom crashing into reinforced concrete at 500mph. First of all, notice the narrator in the link telling us that the plane is bolted to the ground to keep it from taking off. I think that answers our previous question, but Dunn isn't afraid of sending us there to hear it with our own ears, since he assumes he can always slander and slur our ears later. Also notice that the jet does not punch a hole in the wall. If Dunn wants to make the analogy, he has to explain why the analogy holds and does not hold. He wants it to hold to explain the vaporization. But he wants it to not hold, since there is a hole in the Pentagon and no hole created by the F4 Phantom. One would think that whatever hit the Pentagon *either* vaporized *or* punched a hole through several layers of the building. It cannot do both. Vapor cannot punch holes in walls. This question is addressed over and over on 911 Truth websites, in much more depth than I can address it here, and Dunn thinking it is a strong argument just means he hasn't read anything beyond the articles of his fellow sophists. No doubt he will think our silence means acquiescence, forgetting that his own publication gave him the last word.

Dunn's next substantive point is Allyn Kilsheimer, although he is not substantive in the way Dunn had intended. Dunn gives us a link to *Popular Mechanics*, a periodical already caught lying over and over on this topic and certainly not a scholarly source, regardless. Both Dunn and *PM* quote Kilsheimer claiming to have found a black box, having held body parts in his hands, and so on. Unfortunately, these are all lies. According to real sources reporting at the time, including the *Washington Post* and *Newsweek*, workers from Fairfax County Fire and Rescue Station 14 and the FBI found the black boxes from flight 77. Not only that, but it is patently absurd to believe that the other agencies on hand would allow a structural engineer from a private firm to sift through wreckage and hold body parts in his hands. Rescue teams had arrived long before Kilsheimer, so there was no need for non-professionals to be deputized and turned into paramedics or undertakers.

Again, Dunn hasn't even bothered to search on Kilsheimer, or he would know that we already have the goods on him.\* The main question is why Kilsheimer would change his story, lie so outlandishly, and not even choose a believable lie. Did he really need to pad his other lies with the body parts claim? A secondary question is why *PM* and Dunn would be foolish enough to choose this lie as one of their talking points. The answer, sorry to say, is that it is no more or less outlandish than all the other lies, and they don't have much to choose from. Their best hope at this point is hiring really hammy debaters

like Dunn, who can appear—to those who aren't paying much attention—to win even when they are losing.

Dunn's next feint is equally desperate, and it is that if Fetzer makes one mistake the whole 911 truth movement must fall with him. Fetzer calls an A3 a fighter rather than a bomber, so Dunn claims immediate victory. But in doing so he just looks childish and ham-handed once again. Skeptics of the official story don't have to show what hit the Pentagon. All we have to do is show that evidence was destroyed, tampered with, and suppressed; that thousands of lies have been told, that witnesses have been threatened, intimidated, and denied access to the Commission; and that the physical story, as presented to us in innumerable reports and press conferences and television specials, is an insult to science and all intelligence. This evidence is overwhelming. Dunn and his cronies can dismiss all evidence as "factoids" but that will not make it go away. They can dismiss all skeptics as nuts and cranks, but that will not make them go away, stop doing more research, and stop asking more questions.

I wonder when we will reach a percentage that demands the most basic forms of well mannered debate? One third was not enough for *PM* a year and a half ago. One half does not impress Dunn. Even higher percentages of Europeans are skeptics, but these sophists at the minor magazines have no trouble writing entire countries and continents off with a broad brush. Dunn's buddy at *MacLeans* has already written off all of Canada as an "alternate universe." Europe can be blithely dismissed in some equally jingoistic way. In fact, by continuing to attack JFK skeptics as nutcases—even though recent polls of US citizens have shown that there are 70-80% of us in that camp—these ostriches have shown themselves to be actual fascists. We could reach 95%, one supposes, and they would still attack us because we have not been peer-reviewed by their 5% or because our names are spelled funny or because we once used a colon instead of a semi-colon.

But there are glad tidings here as well. If the debunkers actually believed we were clinically insane, unpatriotic, marginalized, or ineffective, they wouldn't need to print all these books and articles answering us. You don't need to debate the clinically insane. They wouldn't need to pay all these creeps to lie and destroy evidence, they wouldn't need to hire sophists like Dunn and Steyn and Meigs and Chertoff and Reagan and Penn and Teller to come in and muddy the waters with misdirection and invective. They are desperate.

Yes, they are desperate, and that is why they thought it might be a good idea to print these two letters from James Fetzer. A magazine that is in a real position of power and authority has no reason to print two unedited letters from a vocal opponent. It normally doesn't happen that way, as I well know. But they can see that they are outmanned and factually outgunned all over the internet—as any search on the subject would tell them\*—and the best they can do is set their dogs on an occasional intruder. No doubt they had hoped the dog would snag a major vein in all his tearing about, and they must be disappointed that the little guy just went for the scrotum.

\*For instance, do a Yahoo search on Allyn Kilsheimer and the Phoenix Project comes up third; *Popular Mechanics* comes up second; and Lets Roll Forums, which is just one of many sites that debunks

*Popular Mechanics*, comes up first. This is astonishing positioning for a private listserv, just one of thousands of 911 truth sites.

#### **4 - An Email Exchange with Noam Chomsky**

On November 14, 2006, I wrote Dr. Chomsky requesting clarification on his video comments about 911. These comments have caused a gigantic flap in certain circles, and not just in the 911 Truth Movement.

The video in question:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LoDqDvbgeXM&mode=related&search=>

The quote in question:

"If it [Bush did it] is true, which is extremely unlikely, who cares? It doesn't have any significance. It's a little bit like the huge energy that's put out on trying to figure out who killed JFK. Who knows? Who cares? Plenty of people get killed all the time, why does it matter that one of them happened to be JFK? If there was some reason to believe there was a high level conspiracy it might be interesting."

Dr. Chomsky was kind enough to grace me with three emails on three consecutive days, and I hope he will forgive me if I quote him from these emails, as a means of clearing up this controversy. These emails contain no private information. Dr. Chomsky didn't even address me by name in the replies, so it stands to reason that he was answering the world as a whole, and me only as a temporary representative of that whole.

I have to admit that I found Dr. Chomsky very difficult to converse with. In fact, he was obtuse and testy, the opposite of what I had expected. I expected him to be logical and straightforward, but did not find him to be. As you will see, he refused to comprehend the intent of my questions and did his best to complicate the issues rather than clarify them, like an attorney would. With some pressure, he *did* substantially amend the quote above, however, and that is what this article is about.

I did not enter a discussion of the facts of 911 with Dr. Chomsky. I simply asked him if he meant what he seemed to mean here: that the facts of the matter, whatever they were, did not matter. Here are the most crucial parts of his reply.

You misunderstood. What I said about the JFK assassination is that unless there was a high-level conspiracy that had policy consequences, the actual facts about what happened are of no greater significance than the latest murder of a poor black in downtown Boston. I think that is correct. We shouldn't worship royalty.

As for 9/11, I never said that it is not important who is responsible. Rather, it is very important, but the charges that are circulating are of very low credibility, for reasons I have discussed repeatedly.

Then I pressed him, pointing out that he said that even if Bush did it, it didn't matter.



You misunderstood again. I said that even if it turned out that Bush did it—for which there is no credible evidence—blowing up the WTC would not rank high among his crimes, against the American people as well.

We then entered a long discussion of what he meant by requiring that a high-level plot must have policy consequences. I needed an answer to that, since he seemed to be implying that a high-level plot was not enough by itself to be interesting. It must also have policy consequences. I was led to that implication by his very first statement in the video quote, where we clearly have a high-level plot (Bush Did It). That high-level plot he calls insignificant, so I assumed he was further qualifying his requirements. His subsequent line also confirmed that reading.

The evidence is overwhelming, I believe, that the JFK assassination did not have significant policy consequences, though it did have some.

Here he seems to be saying that the JFK assassination did not have significant policy consequences, therefore it is uninteresting even if it is a high-level plot.

However, Dr. Chomsky told me that this is not what he meant. The clause “that had policy consequences” was just an add-on. It was not meant to be read like I read it. Dr. Chomsky assured me of that in no uncertain terms.

A high-level plot without policy consequences is of course conceivable, but such a remote contingency that it is hardly worth even a brief comment.

Again, I don't doubt that you have something in mind, but there is no question about the readings of the quotes. And again, the notion of a high level plot without policy consequences is so unlikely as to hardly merit a word.

And,

The positive consequences have nothing to do with whether a high-level plot would be interesting. You asked about policy consequences, I mentioned a few.

From all this, I think we may take it that a high-level plot would have to have significant policy consequences and would have to be interesting. Therefore people must care. Chomsky says it explicitly, above:

Rather, it is very important. . .

That answers my question. But if there is still any doubt, I have this from the third email:

I have to say that I am quite astonished that you should even care about casual statements in a video interview. But that's not my problem.

It *is* his problem, since he tells me he is answering up to 7 hours worth of email a day, much of it on 911.

I receive such a deluge of mail about this that I have to be very brief, particularly because I spend 6-7 hours a night responding to mail.

But what is more important is that he tells us that his statement in the video is “casual” and implies that we shouldn’t care about it. In other words, he will not retract it, but it is OK if we ignore it. I recommend that is what we do.

None of this directly impacts Chomsky’s opinion on the fact of who did it, of course. He admits that it is important, but doesn’t admit that there appears to be any high-level plot. But I think we can begin to build an answer to that question as well, using his commentary here.

To begin with, in what he considers to be casual conversation (with the cameras pointed at him and the microphone on), he says “who cares!” regarding 911. He asks us to ignore that later, but it is telling nonetheless. What he is telling us is that he doesn’t much care himself. He may admit that it is important when pressed, but it is not important *to him*, in his research. He has things that are more interesting *to him*, that are more significant, that are greater worldwide tragedies. His arguments that they may in fact *be* more significant worldwide tragedies are strong arguments. This is not to say that 911 is insignificant, only that his projects outrank it, and may deserve to outrank it.

So far, I tend to agree with him. A man has only so many hours in a day, and so many topics he can address with great attention. Chomsky would appear to be telling us he is full-up in that regard.

Or it may be that Chomsky is simply filled to capacity with knowledge of crime. There is only so much knowledge of evil that a good man can pack into his head. It is a distinct possibility that a human being of high intellect and scruple can wrap his head around either the domestic crimes of the US Government or the foreign crimes of the US Government, but not both. Chomsky may be telling us, in a muffled sort of scream, that he is at capacity. 911 is not his field, and he has admitted that he just can’t find the capacity to care. Given that, it would be surprising if he had penetrated far into any secrets involved. Still, his handling of the situation could have been better, to say the very least. In a 2003 article on Znet, he says,

Nevertheless, despite the thin evidence, the initial conclusion about 9/11 is presumably correct.

For all intents and purposes, Chomsky has held to that line for the last three years. But why would he do all his own research for years, depending for most things on foreign sources, never relying on official sources, and yet *presume* the official 911 conclusion was correct? Why would someone who must know what the CIA is as well as anyone decide to accept the standard line that the CIA (the good guy) was tracking Bin Laden (the bad guy), as Chomsky does in this article?

The answer, I think, is that the task of sorting through another mountain of documents, video footage, photographs, misinformation, cover-ups, and lies, is just too daunting, for someone who is already sitting on a mountain that reaches to the Moon. Chomsky is now almost 80. He looks like he is in his 60’s, and talks about as fast as he ever did (he never spoke quickly). This tricks some people into thinking he is still that emotionless but highly energetic and highly moral young man, that wavy-haired

crusader who joined every march and took on every authority. Well, he still has lots of hair and lots of scruples, but he is not 25 anymore.

He could choose to spend that 7 hours a night diving into 911 research, but he clearly prefers to answer his email. That is as telling as anything else. Who else of his stature posts his email address prominently on the web and answers every loudmouth kid who writes? No one I can think of. But it is Chomsky's prerogative to do whatever he likes. He has earned the right to spend 18 hours a day playing chess or pingpong or shuffleboard, if that is what he wants to do. If he likes answering mail, great, it gives a lot of people access to their leader or their Satan, whatever the case may be.

That said, he either needs to address the specific problems of 911 research or beg off completely. Dismissing those in the Truth Movement *in toto* with a wave of his hand, as if they are each and all mental and moral non-entities, is indefensible. Dismissing each and every anomaly with the claim that it is explained by some sort of squishy chaos theory is disingenuous. On other important issues, he is famous for his thoroughness, but here he considers his sound-bite answers to be both complete and authoritative. He is surprised that we do not immediately accept his cursory analysis and his broad dismissals.

For this reason, I think it is necessary to treat his opinion on 911 Truth just like we must treat his video statement above. That is, we are free to ignore it. It is not informed, it is not authoritative, and it is not even serious. It is "casual."

This does not mean that Chomsky is a mole or a shill, he is not senile, his whole career should not be called into question, he should not be knocked down a peg, he is not cowardly. None of that. He should just not be considered a central character here, since he does not really care to do the research. It is not his field. It is not his project, and he does not want it to be his project. He is busy with what he considers to be loftier projects, and that is his call to make.

Addendum, 2010. George Galloway, like Chomsky and Cockburn and several other high profile people who have been surprising holdouts to 911 Truth, has finally come round. For years Galloway ridiculed 911 Truth, but he is now having Truthers on his radio program, treating them with respect. So we see that highly intelligent people can simply fail to do the research, and can broadcast this ignorance without knowing it. I believe the assumption that Chomsky falls into this category is still the most likely explanation. I don't see how the mainstream benefits by publicizing its own methods of fooling people, and to assume Chomsky is an operative is to assume this.

Addendum, 2014. I have changed my mind regarding my conclusion here. It took a couple of years and much more research, but I am now convinced Chomsky is indeed an agent and a mole. He is part of the controlled opposition. See my newer [paper on Ramparts magazine](#), where I join the outing of Chomsky. I apologize for making so many apologies for him. He was a hard hero for me to give up.

## **5 - What Can I Do?**

This is the nine hundred and eleven thousand dollar question, isn't it? Now that you know, what can you do about it?

Everyone I talk to seems to think that if they are not willing to go postal or to join a tax revolt, there is nothing that can be done. As you can see from the long list below, that is not true. If a majority of Americans got in control of their own lives and their own money, this revolution could succeed almost overnight, with no tax revolt, no jail time, and no shots fired. Do I think that will happen? No. Is it physically possible? Yes.

Even the bravest are so far doing nothing or next to nothing. That is why the powers that be are letting them be. They post articles, write books, make documentaries, give speeches. That was good for the first round, the first phase. We have to get informed. But we are past that. Most of the people who want to know now know. We are miles beyond that crucial 5% that was supposed to move history. People are already better-educated about 911 and all the surrounding issues than any counter-revolutionaries in history, and the percentages are far higher, too. Why is nothing happening? The mainstream press is still just testing the waters with a toe. The grassroots marches are still small. How is it that we can poll at 75% plus and still be completely immobile?

People are basically stunned. They are caught in the headlights. They know they must make some movement, but the muscles refuse to respond. These are normal people, many with children, most with jobs. They are in no position to be counter-revolutionaries. What can they possibly do?

Let me put it another way: they are part of the problem in so many ways that they cannot see how to get out. They are invested, financially and psychologically, to such an extent that they think divestiture would be fatal.

But it would not be fatal. In fact, it would be salutary in every way. Their bank accounts might take a hit in the short term (until we can get back all the money stolen by the government), but they would be saner, healthier, happier, and wiser. They would also be more virtuous, for those who still believe in that.

Let me switch gears now and ask them this question: what would it take for you to take positive action? If proof of 911 won't do it, what would? What would cause a person with a job and a family to take positive action? Your government is spending your money to murder innocent people in many



criminal wars, it is spending your money to kill your own neighbors and their children, it is attacking its own citizens and spending literally trillions of dollars to do these things, trillions of dollars that it cannot and will not account for. When it is not stealing and murdering in your name, it is finding other ways to steal from you, including rigging the stock markets, rigging the banks against you (via the Federal Reserve), laundering drug money, and price fixing everything from gasoline to prescription drugs to phone access to heating oil. This same government is acting like the Mob in other ways, controlling the drug trade, gambling, and the media. Parties are thrown aboard illegal offshore Casino ships and in Satanic groves and in the White House itself, parties where children of both sexes are bought and sold. This government is involved in worldwide prostitution, drug running, money laundering, and slavery, further enriching itself and acting in your name, with your tacit approval. It has shredded the Constitution, and you and your children may now be randomly searched, randomly filmed, arrested for anything or nothing. The military you fund may now be used to search you, question you, or arrest you, although this use of the military is expressly forbidden by the Constitution. Courtesy of the Patriot Acts, Homeland Security, and the Military Tribunals Act, you now live in a police state, where the police and military can do anything they want.

Are you waiting until it literally happens to you? Are you waiting for the knock on the door? The gun in the face? It is happening to your neighbors already. It will certainly happen to you.

Are you hoping to avoid any nastiness? Hoping to be “a good German”? How many regrets there were in Germany in 1946, how many there still are. Have you been to Germany, felt the guilt? I have. I have German blood in me, and Jewish blood, too. So my blood is not stupid, nor my ghosts, either. They remember.

Do you prefer to keep your nose clean? Do you prefer that to acting now? Probably the guiltiest Germans are the ones who did absolutely nothing. Who were never bothered by the Gestapo. At least those who were arrested can take some solace in that. There were three classes of people the Gestapo left alone. True Nazis, true idiots, and true cowards. In 2012, when this is all over, what would you give to not be in any of those groups? What action now will save you from that legacy, from that inglorious?

We are still in phase one. Almost nothing has happened yet. We have had the action but no reaction. Even Ray McGovern and Bob Bowman haven't gotten arrested. No one has stopped paying taxes or burned their passports or renounced their citizenship. No patriotic military men have refused orders or organized a coup and gone down in a hail of bullets. Even the whistleblowers have accepted their gag orders. There have been no heroes at the FAA or the DoD or the FBI or the CIA or FEMA or NIST or anywhere else. The greatest heroes so far have been emeritus academics and lone-wolf documentarians, but so far it is all talk. No wants to do anything. They all want someone else to do something. Everyone is petitioning everyone else to act.

These inactions don't impress anyone. That is why Bush could just chuckle when he "got a thumping" in the election. His side is willing to act, and the opposition is only willing to write papers. His side doesn't care that 75% are against them. If the opposition is only going to write papers and make movies, they can reach 95% and still be ignored. And voting doesn't mean a goddamned thing, since the Democrats have been complicit all along. Except for about three people, the Democrats have done nothing but sing God Bless America with the Republicans. Even now, in 2007, they are planning to vote for more troops in Iraq. The handful of semi-heroes in Congress were silenced by the Anthrax scare, and even Robert Reich has admitted that Congress is obsolescent. Stealing votes is now no more than a game for the Republicans. They don't even need to steal the votes in the election. They can just steal them later directly from Congress. No, even that is saying too much. Nader was naïve when he said that the platforms are indistinguishable. It is not that the Democrats have moved right, it is that the blue in Congress is just a painted façade, a color put there fool the people into believing that there are two parties. The only reason everyone isn't in red is because that would look bad on CSPAN. It would be too obvious. The oligarchy has learned to camouflage itself with a two-color cape.

What has been made most apparent in this latest emergency of democracy is the cowardice of our leaders and elders. To give a specific example, I saw Sunsara Taylor on Bill O'Reilly last night. Sunsara is very brave and very intelligent, and she looks great on TV. She made O'Reilly look like an ogre in every possible way. But this is a woman who looks to be just out of college. She is already one of the top speakers in the anti-war movement. Why? Because she has very little competition. You could count the number of heroes on the left without taking off your shoes. Not only do we not have a Eugene Debs, we don't even have a Bob Dylan. Bob is not Bob anymore. "I used to care, but things have changed." When you go to rallies now, the microphone is always handed to somebody's grandmother, or to some firecracker like Sunsara. Are there any men left in America? Is Bob Bowman the only male left in America who has enough personality to get mad? I am not taking anything away from Sunsara or all the very brave mothers and grandmothers. But, damn, when did men become extinct? When did the older generation get taken over by pods? Why is it up to the youth and predominantly to women to fight this battle? Yes, there are a few guys involved, and some older men from the establishment, but way too few. *Way* too few.

[I might also ask why we have to nominate avowed Maoists—Sunsara is a Maoist—to lead the anti-war movement in America, but that is another paper.]

As you finally decide to wake up and do something, you should be clear on one thing: your wording. Many people will be arrested before this is all over, I think, but most, hopefully, will actually achieve a trial of some sort, even if it is before a military tribunal. Notice above that I used the word "counter-revolutionary" when speaking of our movement. It is the rogue government that is revolutionary. When elements in the government become treasonous, it is not treasonous to resist them. Pay close

attention to Bob Bowman's wording. He ran for Congress not to overthrow the government. He ran for Congress to overthrow the illegal, treasonous, temporary, rogue government that threatens the United States. A set of people, whoever they may be, in whatever offices, that conspire to overthrow the Constitution, are governing illegally. They are treasonous. This is a Constitutional government by law, and they are existing outside that law. We are inside that law and intend to remain there, so that we are not revolutionaries, are not treasonous, are not guilty of sedition, and are not resisting a legal government. We are resisting an illegal government that has left the Constitution far behind.

Below I will list some of the things you can do. Some of them are pretty easy to do and some of them are very difficult to do. I don't think I will have to tell you the difference.

1) Shut down the mainstream media. You can do this by not buying it or buying into it. It is that simple. This is one of the easy ones. It is like shutting down Hitler's propaganda machine. Cancel all your subscriptions to magazines and newspapers. They have all failed miserably. Many of them are criminally complicit and the rest are criminally negligent. This includes lefty things like Counterpunch, Democracy Now, The Progressive, The Nation, and so on. If the rag you are reading is not calling for impeachment, trials for war crimes, massive firings, long jail terms for thousands of people, drastically downsizing the FBI, CIA and DoD, and abolishing the Federal Reserve, then that rag is itself treasonous. 911 is a great litmus test. Anyone who is still denying or hedging is complicit or absurdly uninformed. You should quit watching the TV news. The Nielsen ratings of all the news shows should go to zero. Even Keith Olbermann is not talking about 911. Jon Stewart, avoiding it. NBC is as good as state-owned; the differences between it and FOX are only cosmetic. If you need news, go to Infowars or alternate media online. Don't go to mainstream sources online either. Don't go to Yahoo, AOL, MSN, or any of the other mainstream news gatherers, since they are all lying to you and cheating you. Avoid other CIA mouthpieces like Wikipedia and Google. Don't fund or buy products at any of these places. Don't even surf there, since their advertising money comes from hits. If you have to surf mainstream sources, try to do it in Europe or Canada, where American sources will not benefit from your money or your hits.

2) Don't buy anything you don't need very very much. Buy directly from the producers when you can, from small local sources. Boycott all large companies. In general, boycott the present in all ways.

3) Kill your TV and your cellphone and every gadget that is not critical to your daily life. If you have to watch TV or see a movie, see something decent, which usually means something old. Modern programming is too loud, is paced too fast, is morbid, vulgar, and pathological in every conceivable way. Programs like CSI and 24 make you mentally ill. Boycott Disney and CGI, both of which are nefarious. CGI is a plastic world that is preparing your mind for a plastic and infinitely vulgar future. Resist it. Also resist contemporary music, which is mostly garbage. Drum machines turn your brain to mud and repetitive lyrics make you stupid. Boycott anything that PDiddy even gets near. Boycott

remade songs and sampling and techno music. They are all encouraged and used by those who want your brain cells to malfunction and your synapses to rot. Entertainment is one of the biggest businesses on the planet. It steals your money and brainwashes you at the same time. It enriches the corporations and impoverishes you in every way, financially as well as mentally. Notice, for instance, how many times terrorism is mentioned in the top shows like 24, CSI, Navy NCIS, and all the rest. These shows could not be more useful to the status quo if they were written by the CIA, and many of them probably are. Remember that the CIA is pre-reading the *New York Times*; why not pre-writing CSI?

- 4) Boycott all international banks. Use small local banks, or, even better, don't use banks at all. Don't buy insurance of any kind. Don't use credit cards. Don't use preferred customer cards or shop at stores that require them—and tell them that you are avoiding them for that reason. It is a way for the store and the government to collect data and to avoid having a general markdown for everyone. It is basically a *markup* for guys, who statistically refuse to deal with such things.
- 5) Don't use drugs—not because they are evil, but because your money is being used to support the CIA and globalism. If pot is that important to you, grow your own. Don't use prescription drugs either—they *are* evil. If you need an upper, try sex or organic coffee; a downer, try a local beer or organic wine. Sleep more, no matter what doctors or surveys tell you. Your dreams act as natural uppers and downers, in a natural dose.
- 6) Don't gamble. You might as well mail your paycheck directly to the mobsters and save yourself the time and frustration. Don't play the lottery, which is just a tax on stupidity.
- 7) Get out of the stock market. It is gambling and it is evil. It is direct financial support of corporate America and directly funds the corruption and crime, including murder, slavery, genocide, kidnapping, and sex crimes. Invest in small companies directly, by buying their products and by loaning them start-up money at low or no interest.
- 8) Quit thinking in terms of investment. Investment is money for nothing. What makes you think you have a right to make money for doing nothing? Let the people who are working in the company make the money. If you want to make money, offer the world a useful product. Create something.
- 9) Don't go to malls or shop at chains or franchises. Especially avoid the chain bookstores, which are all controlled just like the newspapers and magazines they sell. Don't support the major publishers, either. Buy used books, old books, second-hand books, library seconds, and if you have to buy a new book, get it from a small locally owned shop, even if you have to pay a dollar more. Spend some time being sure that as little of your money gets blood on it as possible. Do not give it to anyone who is connected to the crimes, no matter how distantly. What you spend is even more important than what you pay in taxes, since most people still spend more than they are taxed. If everyone were able to be in control of every penny they spent, the revolution could succeed without a tax revolt.
- 10) Always buy used or second hand, if you can. This immediately cuts the profits of the major corporations in half. It also saves you a bundle. The amount of good used equipment and



merchandise in the US is incredible. You could go the rest of your life without buying anything new, and still live like a rich person.

11) Avoid all plastics, including PVC, Styrofoam, fiberglass insulation, shrinkwrap, plastic bags, and all excess packaging. They harm you in any number of ways, not least by being ugly and smelling bad. They cause interior air pollution just sitting there and exterior air pollution when they are discarded and burned. By being cheap they add extra profits to corporations—who should be making products from decent materials instead of toxic paste.

12) If you are working for an evil company, quit your job. Do something that needs to be done. Even collecting welfare or unemployment is more virtuous and useful to the future of the earth than working for the devil. Put a crowbar in the gears any way you can.

13) Boycott all advertising. Do not work for advertisers. Do not watch news videos online that begin with an ad. Do not put ads on your site. Do not buy products that are advertised. If a product is advertised a lot, boycott it just for that reason. Do not let ads be placed in schools or on school busses. Boycott businesses with large or bad signs and tell them why you are doing it. This will make you saner and will make cities less ugly and dirty. And it is one more monkeywrench in the system.

14) Drive less, travel less, don't commute. Either don't take a job too far from your house, or move closer to your job. Common sense. Many jobs can be done from home. You have to think about your situation and control it, instead of accepting the short list that is offered you. Buy a bike. Walk. Take the bus or the train. Boycott taxicabs, which are too big, too fast, and too inefficient. All these things directly impact the oil industry, which relies on your complicity. They could not make record profits if you did not give them record profits. Big companies are out of control because people are out of control. You could not have one without the other.

15) Turn down your heat and your air-conditioning. Not only are you destroying the biosphere, you are further enriching and empowering the power companies and oil companies. Your body is healthier when it is not overheated or overcooled, anyway. Make your body burn a few of those calories to stay warm.

16) Move out of the country. If you don't want to open yourself to charges of tax evasion, there is one legal way to never pay taxes to the US government again. Leave the country and give up your citizenship. Canada would love to have you, or New Zealand or Australia or Mexico or Venezuela. This kind of tough love may be the greatest patriotism of all, short of going to jail. You must cut off the money supply to the addicts, and this is the only way to do it without a visit from the IRS goons. Mail your ripped or charred passport directly to the White House. That is one message they may understand. But keep your eyes open wherever you move to. It is not called globalism for nothing. Canada is being annexed right now; you can run but you can't fully hide.

17) Don't allow you or your family to be illegally searched. Do not agree to random searches or inspections, do not volunteer any information, and know your Constitutional rights. Read the Constitution and memorize it. It is short and simple. If your public school is terrorizing your kids,

remove them from it. Put them in a private school or hire a tutor. Many people are now hiring private teachers to lead small classes for groups of children. Several families splitting the costs makes it very affordable.

18) Boycott all air travel until security returns to 1970 levels. Bankrupt all the airlines, if that is what it takes. They should have resisted this security hoax from the beginning, just like the *New York Times* should have resisted the torching of the First Amendment. If these companies can't act in our interest or in their own, they should be bankrupt. The whole security scare is manufactured. It is simply the first step in getting people used to being illegally searched. Roadblocks and sobriety checks were the second. Demand probable cause or a search warrant at any random check and be prepared to spend a night in jail. Then file a suit for unlawful imprisonment. They cannot legally keep you in jail or charge with anything, they are just testing you. If they have to arrest people from a long line of cars, they will give up the madness.

19) Boycott Congress. Stop petitioning these people to do the right thing. You are wasting your breath and that has been made very clear. What do you need, a sign in bold letters? Thoreau said that we shouldn't need to petition our representatives to do the right thing. That is why they are there in the first place. We don't have to petition the cook at the restaurant to make a sandwich—that is his job. But it is even clearer now. In Thoreau's time Congress had not yet completely crawled into the President's pocket, looking for coins there. Now, you couldn't find 535 bigger non-entities, non-heroes, if you scoured the entire planet. A majority are explicitly complicit and the rest are implicitly complicit. If they weren't complicit they would be on the steps of the Capitol every morning with a megaphone, shouting out the truth. They would be on CNN and MSNBC raising hell noon and night. John Conyers is the most outspoken, but even he is not doing his job. He is not stating it plainly enough, loudly enough, or often enough. He should be like Eugene Debs, writing letters to the *New York Times* from his jail cell (after being hauled off for using a megaphone on the steps of the Capitol). These Congresspeople know of corruption and crime that may surpass even those things Debs was addressing, and yet they sit there and pass meaningless resolutions and rubberstamp laws to protect the criminals and themselves. These people are not representing you, never intended to represent you, and never intend to begin representing you. They will have to step down when the executive steps down. The whole lot should be impeached together, along with the Supreme Court. What we need are general articles of impeachment against the entire government, including but not limited to the CIA, the DoD, the FBI, the Joint Chiefs, the Federal Reserve, the IRS, FEMA, NIST, and so on. These articles of impeachment must therefore come from the people. We need 50 state propositions and 50 million signatures. We need a government that represents the people, not big corporations and super-wealthy titans. To get that, we don't have to "overthrow the government." We have to demand the government that the Constitution guarantees us. To solve the current crisis, we don't need communism or anarcho-syndicalism or Maoism or anything else. We just need people to obey the laws we already have. We need the President to quit stacking up illegal signing statements. We need Congress to quit passing unconstitutional laws. We need the people to quit agreeing to this quick slide into fascism. Historically, you may need a revolution to create a Constitutional government, but we already have a Constitution. We don't need a revolution. We need those who have stolen the government to give it

back to us. We are not the revolutionaries, they are. They have performed a silent coup in order to destroy the Constitution.

20) Join every march and group that you can. Be seen and heard, but behave with dignity. You are a representative of the truth and of the positive future. Emotion and anger are OK, but even the emotion and anger must be informed and directed. It must not be chaotic or presage chaos. Your emotion and anger should give others hope, not the reverse. [see *worldcantwait.net*]

21) Be prepared to join the big march, when huge numbers of people go into the streets for a general strike. This has happened in other countries and it may happen soon in the US. You must be prepared to join it at an instant's notice, so stock up some food. You don't have to build bunkers, tape the windows, and store a year's worth of toilet paper, you just have to be prepared to feed yourself for a few days. Plan ahead just a tiny bit and it will save you some inconvenience and some begging from neighbors.

22) This is where it gets hard. Here we graduate to tax revolt. You become a conscientious objector to the crimes, like Thoreau or Gandhi, and you go to jail. This action doesn't make sense unless you coordinate it with a lot of other people. It is sort of like self-immolation or hari-kari. The message is bright but short-lasting, and it takes a lot out of you. To succeed, you need numbers. If you coordinate it with thousands or millions of other people, it can actually be fun. You bring your own protection to prison, and you have some friends there to pass the time. Right after the next fake terrorist attack would be a good time for this one. Five or ten million people going into the streets and saying no more. No work tomorrow, no taxes, no busses, no trains, no airplanes, no TV, no business as usual. Odds are, the number would be 50 million by the end of the week. The rogue government then attacks 50 million people and puts them in concentration camps or it steps down. After that, we fish the Constitution out of the trash and start over.

23) Don't get too far out in front of the pack. Those are the ones picked off first. You don't need to be a martyr. Tax revolt and other bright spectacles require numbers to be effective, as I said. Getting arrested for any reason, beyond questioning an illegal search or something, requires numbers to be effective. Questioning a police officer is a trumped up offense, but tax evasion is a defined offense (despite the 16<sup>th</sup> Amendment). Don't do something crazy and get yourself locked up for nothing. We could use some high-profile people in jail—that would be proper PR. But unless you are famous, we need you free as long as possible. Jail should be a group project. The only point of jail is to overwhelm the jails, so that jail is no longer a possible method of governance.

Numbers 21 and 22 are likely to be the real solution. But while we are waiting for the rest to get informed, or informing them, we can do the other things, too. These other things are both moral and effective. They make us feel better and make it more difficult for those we resist. They also discipline us for the more difficult times ahead. It is coming. There is no doubt of that. So you best be ready. As Kurt Vonnegut put it, "Anything that can be done, *will* be done, so hunker down." That can either be scary or it can be fun. Probably it will be both, like everything else.

## **6 - Analysis of the Evan Fairbanks Video**

In the famous Fairbanks footage there is a reflection of the plane in the wall behind the man who looks up. The Web Fairy comments on this, but not beyond pointing out that it is there. She calls it a shadow, but it is obviously meant to be a reflection, not a shadow. Parts of it are white, for instance, and shadows are not white.

First I checked to be sure it was perfectly synchronized with the plane above, which it is, close enough. Then I noticed that it was reversed, with the whiter wing below (whereas in the image above, the whiter wing is above). At first I thought this was confirmation, until I thought about it some more.

Finally I realized that there is no way for a reflection to be there at all. There is no way for a reflection of the plane to appear on that surface. That surface is nearer to us, the viewer, than the WTC Tower behind it. The airplane is crashing into the WTC and is therefore in the same optical plane as the tower. You cannot create a reflection in a mirror that is nearer to you, of an object that is farther away from you than the mirror.

Just consider how the light would travel from the plane to the camera. There is no possible angle that it can reflect from that surface. Whoever decided to manipulate this film treats that surface as if it were just behind the WTC, in which case it might reflect a same-size image like this. As it is, it can't reflect any size image since the image cannot bounce from that surface and reach our eye, or the camera.

And even if the wall had been slightly behind the WTC, this still would not have caused the reflection to reverse. In that case we would see an unreversed image. The mirrored wall would have to slope back at some angle (about 45 degrees, in this case), in order to send any image of the plane to the camera, but the image would not be reversed. It would be just like the primary image, only squashed vertically a bit.

The only way you would get a reversed image is if the airplane were being reflected in a pool directly below the tower. But in order to see that reversed image, you would have to be looking at both the plane and its reflection from some height above the ground. You cannot see a reflection in a pool from ground level, unless you are right at the edge of the pool.

But that is not all. By carefully measuring the plane in the video (not the reflection but the main image) I found that the wingspan of the plane is greater than its length. A big surprise, since not many planes have this. If the plane is at an angle to the eye, then the wingspan can look smaller than it is, but never larger than it is. The plane in the video is at no angle that would change the appearance of its length. These two facts taken together mean that the plane in the video must have a wingspan greater than its length, even accounting for all possible angular distortion. The most likely candidate for this is the 777-200LR, which is a similar but slightly larger boeing twin engine plane. The 767 is not a candidate, since in all models the length exceeds the wingspan. The film fakers have apparently used footage of a 777, thinking no one would notice. But it is easy for anyone to do the measurements right on the



screen. That plane is not a 767 and therefore it cannot be flight 175. If it is not a 767 and is not flight 175, then it is most likely a faked image. That would corroborate all these claims that the plane entry looks wrong.

But the reflection is clearly faked. Why would anyone fake a reflection of a real plane? We don't need further confirmation in this footage that the plane is there, since we can supposedly see it. The only answer is that the fakers got too cute.

## **7 - WTC TP**

After several failed attempts to explain the collapse of World Trade Center Seven, NIST and FEMA have now joined together to release this latest report. In it we find the definitive analysis of the most critical aspects of the collapse, including the final scientific data based on years of investigation and computer modeling.

The full report has been published and it contains some 180 pages, including 20 pages of charts and models. What is offered here is simply a gloss. It is hoped that by reading it the public will at last be satisfied that the case has been solved and that the investigation may now be closed.

### **1. WTC7: the “flashpoint model”:**

The key piece of evidence here is the discovery of janitorial service orders and memoranda stored off premises in computers at the companies hired by Silverstein, Inc., to clean the offices. By studying the documents from the week of September 11, 2001, NIST scientists made the shocking discovery that toilet paper dispensers in WTC 7 had been filled beyond capacity the morning in question. Not only that, but interviews with cleaning personnel that had been on duty that morning indicate that many excess rolls had been stored in basement supply rooms, broom closets, and even (at times) in the stalls themselves.

Cleaning personnel admit that this was strictly against written policy and building fire codes, since the maximum number of toilet paper rolls allowed in a building is regulated by city, state, and federal legislation. Due to various well-understood and documented fire codes that limit the number of rolls based on either number of building employees or square footage, it is not fully understood by experts how these excess rolls slipped through the inspection lists, inventories, and accounting procedures.

Based on these interviews and other eyewitness accounts, and extrapolating from highly sophisticated computer models, technicians from FEMA have estimated that there may have been as many as 17,201 rolls of highly flammable toilet paper in the building at the time of the first fires. Not

only that, but by looking at blueprints and floor plans (figs. 1, 2) you can see that this material was spread throughout the building on every floor and in every sector.

## **2. Corridors of influence:**

The second piece of evidence was discovered by NIST when they noticed that the plumbing in WTC7 might act as a link between these dangerous caches of highly flammable material. As might be expected, a close study of the plumbing grid (fig. 3) shows that every lavatory was connected to every other by a rather short stretch of pipe. It was theorized that fire in one sector would spread to another via these pipes. A loss of fireproofing material on these pipes would facilitate such a spread, by making it impossible to suppress the fire along any given length of pipe.

Top FEMA engineers pointed out to NIST that their laboratory tests had indicated as early as 1976 that methane trapped within the pipes would also facilitate this spread, since any tiny leaks in the pipes would tend to vent gas into the immediate area. Since the pipes were contained within walls, this gas could not disperse in a natural way, and might tend to travel—like the pipe—along certain hidden corridors. This would dramatically augment the already considerable danger, leading, in most foreseeable cases, to a crisis.

Some will think that methane must be in solution in the pipes, but any casual analysis will show that methane does not dissolve in water. Like other gases, methane forms bubbles within the water, and these bubbles may escape at the first opportunity.

Maintenance documents from the period 1980-2000 indicate that the asbestos fireproofing on the pipes had never been removed, although federal law required the removal of all asbestos from buildings during that period. Larry Silverstein indicated to FEMA that he had hired a firm to remove the asbestos, and that they were scheduled to do so in November of 2001. But at the time of the collapse, no work had begun on that.

Previous to the asbestos legislation, it would have been necessary to re-fireproof the plumbing every 25 years. The reason for this is that the asbestos was attached to the pipes with adhesives that had a limited lifespan. Industrial adhesives in the 1970's and 1980's had not reached the level of sophistication we now expect, and top scientists in the department of molecular physics at MIT have admitted on record that anywhere from 75% to 99% of the asbestos had probably flaked off by September 2001. At this level of loss, the pipes would have been highly vulnerable to the crisis mentioned above. In fact, the crisis may have reached a critical level do to this very loss of adhesive. As the adhesive degraded and lost its original molecular structure—allowing the asbestos to become detached—it would also allow for the detachment of the adhesive from the pipe itself. This would liberate any underlying weaknesses in the pipe, of whatever nature or size. Leaks that had developed over the years, especially at the joints, would have been automatically sealed by the adhesive. But

without this adhesive, the methane would be free to escape in trace quantities, facilitating the quick progression of fire along the length of the pipe.

### **3. Simultaneous failure:**

Since the building's 178 lavatories were distributed evenly throughout the entire structure, it can be shown that fire that spread first to these rooms would tend to threaten the building as a whole, and to do so in a balanced manner. A fire in one lavatory could spread via this mechanism to all other lavatories, and it could do so in a matter of minutes. Once the fire reached these rooms, the unreasonable supply of toilet tissue would act as kindling, moving the fire from floor to ceiling and compromising the structural integrity of the sector in question.

Further study of blueprints and floor plans in light of this theory has convinced scientists at NIST that fire seen in windows on the day of the collapse were fires contained in those few lavatories that featured external windows. As you can see (fig. 4), a majority of lavatories in WTC7 were internal rooms; they had no windows. Only 11 of the 178 lavatories featured windows that were visible on the street, and these windows were of course frosted.

Although most of the detritus of WTC7 was shipped to China within months of collapse, NIST was able to gain access to several shards of glass from the building. In the presence of highly interested Secret Service agents and FBI officials, these scientists showed that the frosted shards had been exposed to fire where the unfrosted shards had not. This showed beyond any question that the fires seen from the street were in the building's lavatories.

Extrapolating from this pivotal evidence, FEMA demonstrated that statistical models showed that the odds of visible lavatories being on fire and non-visible lavatories not being on fire was less than 1 in 430,000. From this we may assume without fear of contradiction that all lavatories in WTC7 were burning quite hot that day.

### **4. Private Sector Corroboration:**

Following upon this success, the FBI delivered subpoenas to Proctor and Gamble and the International Paper Company to produce internal documents. Upon the receipt of these documents, it was discovered that toilet tissue burns in a controlled fire at approximately 451° Fahrenheit. Independent tests at CalTech, NASA, and the Jet Propulsion Lab confirmed this number to within  $\pm 3$  degrees.<sup>1</sup> Some brands such as Charmin' and Snuggles burned at much higher temperatures, due to the high content of softeners, but no amount of investigation was able to uncover the brand in use at WTC7. As many women worked in the building on a daily basis, there is a statistically high probability that the

tissue in question was “squeezably soft” to one level or another. Regardless of the softness of the tissue, with methane as an accelerator this temperature may have reached levels capable of significantly weakening structural steel. There is unanimous agreement to that across all federal agencies.

## **5. Timing of collapse:**

We have shown the mechanism for initiation of collapse, and the cause of balance, but the speed of collapse also has required explanation. The first two reports were not able to account for this speed, since they had not yet been made privy to the janitorial documents. Now that we have those documents, and the formidable theory that those documents allow, we can prove beyond any doubt that the building collapsed in the only way it could: that is, straight down and very fast.

No one had expected or argued that such a short and squat building would topple over. WTC7 was not a tall skinny building like WTC1 or WTC2, so no one was surprised that it collapsed straight down. But some could not see why all parts would fall at the same time. It was thought that some parts might remain standing, or that some would fall a few seconds later than others. Since we have pointed to the lavatories as the primary initiators of collapse, and since these lavatories were evenly spread throughout the building, it is not difficult to see that the question of simultaneity is answered. But what of the speed? Can we imagine that the lower floors would not inhibit the collapse? Can we imagine that the steel support columns in the interior would all give way simultaneously and completely? Can we imagine that the whole building would fall at the rate of a controlled demolition, just as if explosives had brought it down?

We can indeed, since you can see that explosives of a sort *did* bring the building down. Not explosives consciously planted beforehand. Not manufactured explosives, not dynamite or any other sort. No, what we had at WTC7 was an explosive thousands of times more dangerous than dynamite: softened toilet tissue and methane gas. No demolition expert could create such a deadly cocktail.

This also explains Larry Silverstein’s oft-quoted comment about “pulling it.” Given the facts we now know, it is clear that Mr. Silverstein was referring to the plumbing. Firefighters in the basement, cued to the problem by maintenance workers, had discovered a huge clog in the sewer main. One of these firefighters informed Mr. Silverstein that the removal of the clog would provide free movement in the pipes above, which would of course allow for the movement of the methane gas within them. It was feared that this methane gas would provide the match to an explosion (the firefighters heroically predicted this even without knowing of the toilet tissue excess). Not realizing the enormity of his action, and preferring a sanitary building, Mr. Silverstein ordered them to “pull it”—an order he now bitterly regrets.

## **Conclusion:**

All of this evidence, taken as a whole, can lead to only one conclusion: WTC7 was a ticking time-bomb. A convergence of high-risk presets, combined with gross janitorial and accounting negligence, led to a crisis situation that could not correct itself. Given the dangers inherent in the system, scientists at NIST and FEMA concluded that the tenants of WTC7 were lucky indeed to have escaped without further loss of life. Mr. Silverstein's order to pull it was rash and unadvised, but this report can show no negligence involved. Under normal circumstances, one would not expect the unclogging of a sewer main to bring down an entire building, and Mr. Silverstein had no foreknowledge of the issue of toilet paper, much less the more technical issues of softeners, adhesives, loss of asbestos, and methane accelerators due to leaks in pipes.

<sup>1</sup>NASA at first delivered the number 233<sup>0</sup> Fahrenheit, but it was soon discovered that they had confused Metric numbers with Imperial, bringing the figure back in line with other agencies.

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# LINKS PAGE

YOU WRITE WHAT  
YOU'RE TOLD!



**JustArt-e.com**

[The Website of Yuqi Wang](#), one of the world's great realists.

[Top New York realist Jacob Collins](#)

[My Guild Co-founder Van Nielsen](#). A great painter and sculptor.

[Jeremy Lipking](#). A top figure painter. Excellent nudes.

[The Website of Marc Dalessio](#), a fine realist working out of Florence. Check out his blog.

[Robert Genn's newsletter and archives](#)

[Aron Wiesenfeld](#), famed for *Girl with Bike*, *the Delegate's Daughter*, and other paintings.

[Gary Arseneau's Blog](#). Blowing the whistle on fake Rodins, fake Degas, fake Matisses, and many fake lithographs. Before you make "limited edition prints," you had better read Gary's blog.

[An interesting interview with Jock Sturges](#)

[LOTR Sequel](#), not fan fiction but a 400-page true sequel to the Lord of the Rings, with maps, illustrations, songs, poems, and extensive footnotes on the language and history of Middle Earth.

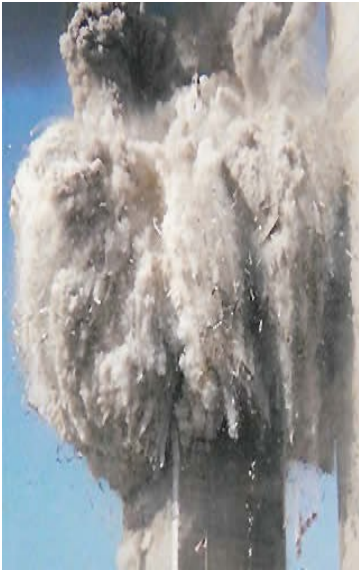
[September 11: A New Pearl Harbor](#). By Massimo Mazzucco. The latest comprehensive look at 911.

[2007 Zogby Poll on 911](#). For those who dismiss 911 questions as coming from a "lunatic fringe," this national poll proves the opposite. A majority (51%) say there should be a new and better investigation, and a super-majority (67%) say WTC7 should have been investigated by the 911 Commission. A full 31% say that our own government either let it happen on purpose or made it happen. These numbers are approaching those of New Yorkers polled by Zogby in 2004, a full 50% of whom believed that the government let it happen on purpose or made it happen. Another interesting statistic from 2007 is that women are more likely to question 911 than men, by a full ten percentage points.

[New York Times/CBS poll](#) shows 84% think 911 was an inside job. That is from a 2011 mainstream report, at the London *Independent*, which reports the findings in those terms.

[Fires and steel experiment](#), a youtube video proving that World Trade Center 7 steel was not deformed by fires or sulfured by gypsum boards. The sulfur that caused such deformation must therefore have come from some other source, probably thermate or another exotic explosive.

[Patriots Question 911](#), a list of over 3,000 high-ranking people who question 911, including ex-Presidents, Senators, top military, CIA, FBI, structural engineers, architects, pilots, and more. If nothing else makes you doubt the official story, this will.



One question: does this look like a gravitational collapse to you?

[Architects and Engineers: the Mystery of World Trade Center 7](#). A short but powerful documentary on the controlled demolition of WTC7, from 1,500 architects and engineers, as well as victims families, all calling for a new investigation of 911.

[Global Research](#), who benefitted from 911.

[Analysis of Financial Terrorism in America](#). A fantastic article by David Degraw at Global Research, outlining how the wealthy are looting the world and stealing from you personally.

[Scholars for 911 Truth](#)

[My own 911 Papers](#)

[Fabled Enemies](#), by Jason Bermas. The most up-to-date video documentary on 911, by one of the *Loose Change* investigators. Excellent.

[South Tower Anomalies](#). Another good 911 film.

[Al Qaeda Doesn't Exist](#). A new documentary showing who and what Bin Ladin and Al Qaeda really are: creations of the CIA.

[911 Timeline](#). The best source of footnoted information about all aspects of 911, compiling mainstream reportage from all over the world.

[Who is Larry Silverstein?](#) A long article from Haaretz elucidating how the owner of the World Trade Center is linked to the Israeli government. Very disturbing. Deleted by Haaretz but saved by the

Wayback Machine archive.

[Who is Barack Obama?](#) The Associated Press has now been caught reporting (syndicated worldwide) in 2004 that Obama was born in Kenya.

[Hacking Democracy](#). A film by Bev Harris and others, from [blackboxvoting.org](http://blackboxvoting.org), about stealing elections with voting machines.

[Black Box Voting](#) website, by Bev Harris, informing you of the latest in vote fraud.

[2004 and 2008 elections were stolen](#), says Stephen Spoonamore, an expert on voting and ATM machines, in this eight part interview.

[Open Voting Consortium](#) website, by Alan Dechert: one solution to voting problems, though still not the simplest.

[Brad Blog](#). Investigative reporting on vote fraud, etc.

[George Washington's Blog](#). One of the best online.

[Noam Chomsky, CIA asset](#). After several years of denial, I have come to see that Chomsky is indeed playing a long game of misdirection, leading the left away from the major players and the big stories. 911 was his downfall.

[PsyWar](#). The documentary on psychological warfare. Lots of good information, although this film happens to be part of the PsyWar itself. Chomsky, Zinn and the rest are misdirecting you. Notice, for instance, that not once in 139 minutes do any of these guys mention Intelligence. You are supposed to believe that propaganda is created and disseminated by private PR firms. Right.

[The Obama Deception](#). A documentary revealing Obama's lies and his connection to Wall Street and the globalist agenda. Also see my paper [on Obama](#), predating this film.

[Bloody Sunday](#). Not just a song by U2. 14 Irish demonstrators murdered by British police in Ireland. Learn about it. Another one is just around the corner, in the US.

[Project Censored](#). This link is to the top 25 censored stories of 2009, that is, the top stories you haven't read in the mainstream press, and won't. Not a conspiracy theory site, this site is recommended by Walter Cronkite, among many others.

[American Free Press](#)

[Oil, Smoke and Mirrors](#). A documentary about peak oil and 911 Truth.

[Henry Kissinger: The Making of a War Criminal](#). Google Video.

[The Corporation](#). Most popular Canadian documentary ever, critiquing the rise of the corporation in recent history--mostly through skewed legislation.

[The Torture of Sami al-Arian](#). Your Patriot Act at work. Also see the documentary "USA vs Al-Arian." Al Arian was arrested, held without charge in solitary confinement, and had all of his civil rights violated, for the "crime" of non-violent support of Palestine. Despite being acquitted by a jury of his peers, he spent 5.5 years in jail, and still faces charges of contempt of court for refusing to testify in a separate case.

[The Fake University](#). Major universities caught faking SAT scores, employment data, and more, to boost enrollment. More proof the entire world is faked.

[The Whitehouse Coup](#). A BBC radio documentary from 2007 about the failed corporate coup against FDR in 1934, led by top families like Morgan and DuPont. What the BBC failed to discover is that the coup succeeded only a decade later.

[Why We Fight](#). A documentary on the War Machine, 2005 winner at Sundance.

[Inner City Press](#), a small online press censored by Google (for covering United Nations corruption), just as I was censored by Yahoo.

[Fluoride Alert](#). You are being poisoned on purpose.

[Government suppresses facts about fluoride](#). Declassified military documents prove gov knew dangers of fluoride as early as 1944, deflecting the crisis with lies about dental benefits.

[EPA's Employees Union](#) is against fluoridation of water, including EPA's own scientists.

[Dr. Stanley Monteith gives a long lecture on the dangers and history of fluoride](#).

[Dr. Dean Burk](#), head of the National Cancer Institute's Cytochemistry Sector from 1938 to 1974, tells us that fluoride is the number one cause of cancer in the US, and that its continued use amounts to mass murder.

[Organic Consumers Association](#) information sheet on fluoride.

[Vaccine Nation](#). Vaccination is another Big Pharma scam.



[Vaxxed](#). A more recent film on the same subject.

[Your tweets are being monitored by the CIA, according to the Associated Press](#).

[British Medical Journal exposes WHO](#). World Health Organization shown to be owned by drug companies.

[Dangers of Mercury Amalgam fillings](#). Don't get them for your children, remove them safely, and lobby for a total ban.

[The Future of Food](#). A great documentary about food production, including a strong indictment of Monsanto and biotech in general. Also shows how the regulatory agencies like the FDA, USDA, and EPA have been bought out and coopted by the corporations.

[Fox News fires reporters at the behest of Monsanto](#), concerning a story on Bovine growth hormones.

[The Dangers of H.A.A.R.P.](#) Alaska's Tesla project to heat the ionosphere, enabling weather control, systems disruption, and other military applications, including possibly mind control. Part 1 of 2.

[The Moon Landing Hoax](#). Fox TV's best documentary ever. Look at the evidence and decide for yourself.

[Dark Mission: NASA Moon Hoax](#). If FOX doesn't give you enough evidence, you can study the evidence in this long three-part documentary.

[American Moon](#) By Massimo Mazzucco. The latest comprehensive expose on the faked moon landings.

[Earth First!](#) Switch over to a real environmental organization. Sierra Club and all the rest have been taken over by the podpeople.

[The Sea Shepherds](#). I love these guys and gals.

["Granny D" Haddock speech](#) at Gettysburg, April 2008.

Mark Twain's [The Mysterious Stranger](#). I never laughed so hard.

[My science site](#)

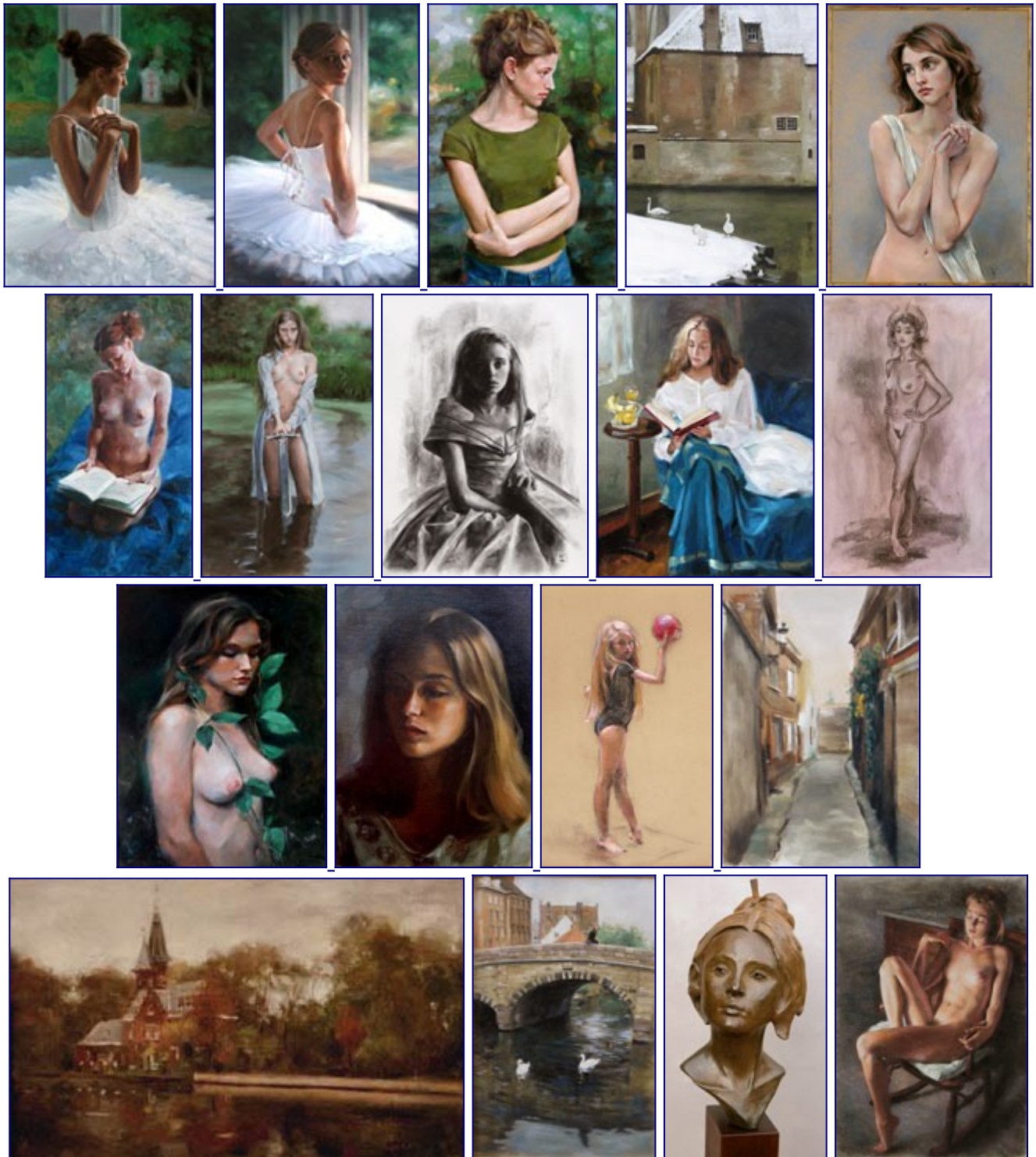
# All the new hi-def scans 2006-2013

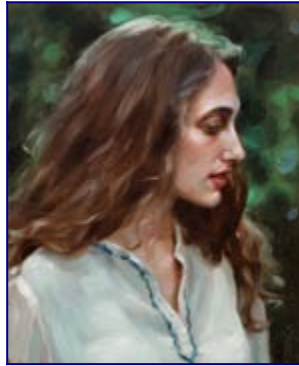
[A Note on these Web-images](#)  
why they look like they do



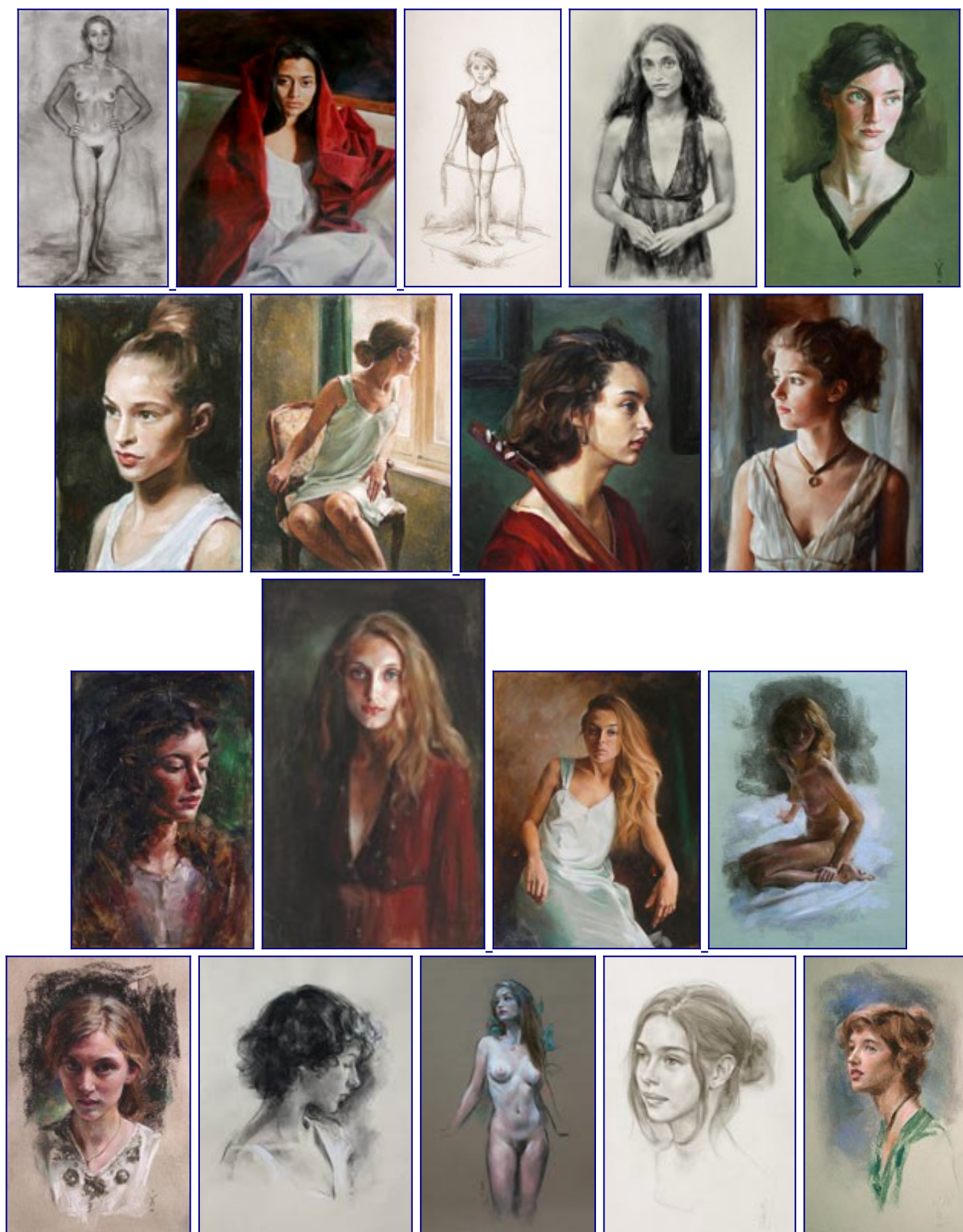


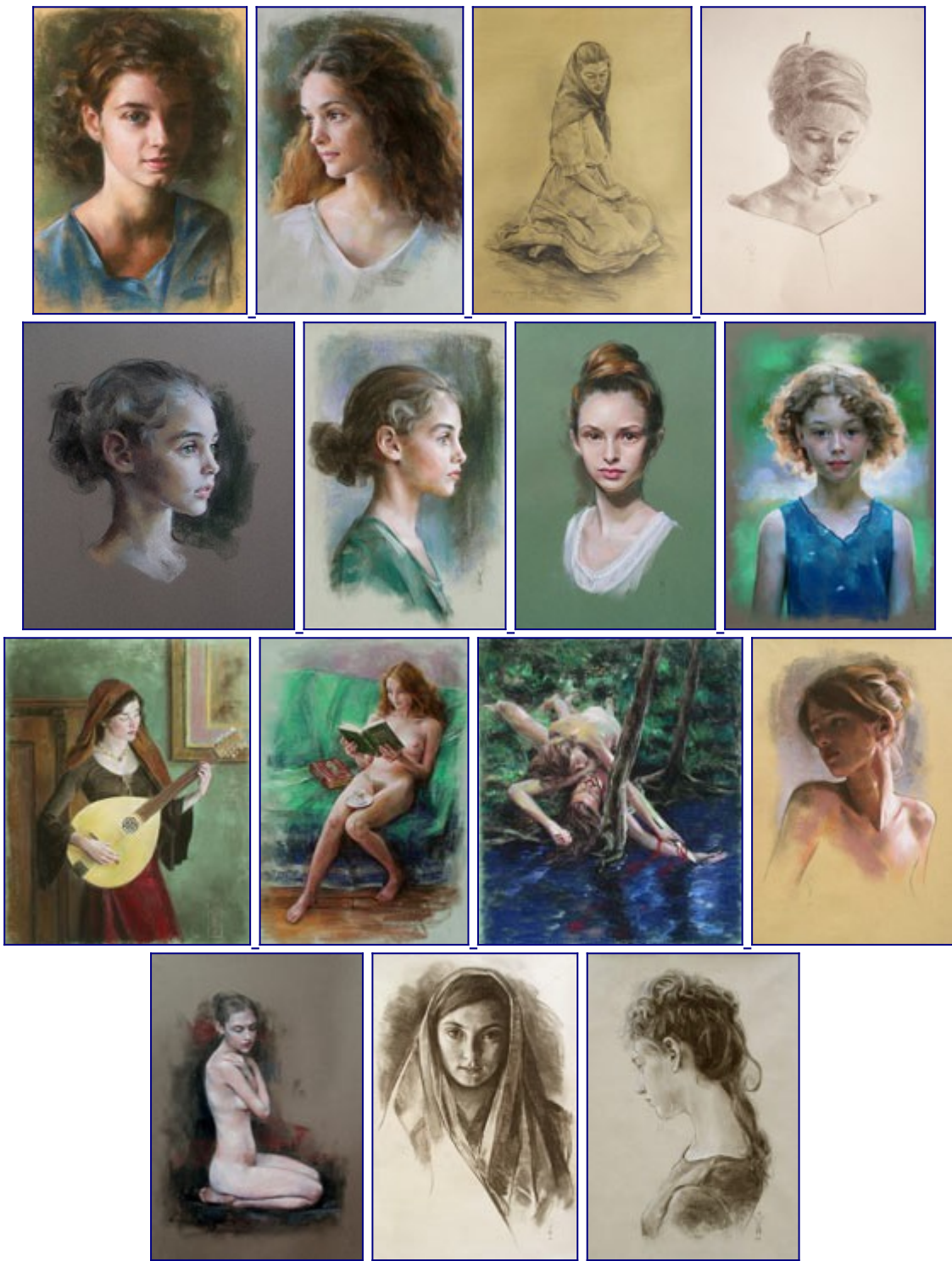












# A Review of Van Nielsen

by Miles Mathis



*The Prodigal*, by Van Nielsen

Some will wonder if I have the “critical distance” necessary to write about my fellow guild founder, [Van Rainy Hecht-Nielsen](#). Possibly not. But I *do* have the critical distance necessary to make fun of his name. I mean, could it *be* any longer? We have foreign-sounding words there, hyphenated no less, mixed together with hippy inventions. I always get a mental image of an old Volkswagen microbus, curtained and handpainted, filled with naked Germans and Swedes growling things like “hecht” and “achtung”, all the while the roof leaks with rain. I hope he will forgive me if I shorten it to the more portable Van Nielsen.

There: if I didn’t have the critical distance when I started, I have just created it. Van will hate me for a few minutes, and in that window I can treat him objectively. Beyond that, the reader should know that I haven’t seen Van in more than two years, not since I moved to Belgium. In the meanwhile he has become a devout Catholic, actually contemplating seminary, while I remain a terrible sinner (against the avant-garde, if nothing else). He has gone through half a dozen major crises, while I have been locked away in my cryogenic chambers—impervious to change or outside influence. He has an epiphany almost daily while I still wear socks I bought in high school.

So we are miles apart in some ways. One thing has remained constant, however, and that is my continuing awe at his talent. No, not just his talent, his achievement. His work, most of it done in his 20’s, did not show promise; it somehow already included many full-fledged masterpieces. One morning he was a beginner and the same afternoon he was *il primo uomo del mondo* (as Cellini said of himself).

A casual websurfer will likely cruise his various websites and come away with very mixed feelings. There he has works of absolute genius next to others that are failed experiments, at best. He has first-rate scans next to terrible scans (as have I, admittedly). And there is just so much to look at—oils, pastels, sculptures, sketches, charcoal drawings. An eye used to looking at heavily edited images, all in a single category or genre, will get dizzy.

But I am going to argue that this is one of the things that makes Van a real artist. He is not a market whore like most of the rest, streamlining his output to fit demand. He is not scared to experiment, to learn what he needs to know, to pass through a middle phase that is neither packaged nor polished. I have read William Whitaker saying in a demo that he wants his paintings to “look great at all stages,” as if someone is giving him marks each hour. This is fastidiousness taken to its pathological limit. No doubt he also wants his bed to look unrumpled even while he is in it. But Van is as far as possible away from this sort of wonkdom. He realizes that a painting or sculpture is not an artclass demo, painted in front of an audience of technophiles. It is a carrier of emotion. As such, it must transcend the tight-assed critique of the webcrawler and amateur.

In this review I am going to prove, simply by presenting the reader with images from these same faulty—human—websites, that Van is the greatest wasted talent in the artworld today. In fact, he is probably the greatest art talent in the world, period—wasted or not. Meaning that in my opinion his current and past work is already better than that of the most famous painters and sculptors alive today. In his 20’s he was already mostly beyond them, so that he had earned the right to any number of failed experiments, epiphanies, dead ends, and redefinitions. Even if he gets permanently lost in a moral or marketing morass, he will still have created some of the finest works in the last century.

Let us begin with sculpture, since it is a far smaller field. Realist sculpture is a nearly dead art. There are some very talented animal sculptors, of the Sherry Sander variety, but when it comes to the human figure, you can count the living masters on one hand. Richard MacDonald, Glenna Goodacre, Bruno Lucchesi, Alex Stoddart and maybe a few others. The recently deceased Frederick Hart was another. But not one of these sculptors has ever created works with the beauty and power of Van’s early work. I do not have time for a full critique of each of these artists, much less of all the other contenders whom I will be reminded of later. But I will reveal to you my overview of those I have listed.

[Before I get started, I will pre-empt *some* complaints by saying that I have chosen these five because they are nearest to being in the classical tradition, following or trying to follow the line of Rodin or Carpeaux. There are lots of other well-known sculptors who are basically outside my argument here, since they are stylizing their figures for one reason or another. In other words, for reasons of their own, they are trying to look African or pre-Hellenistic or Modern or Martian or whatever. By doing this, they can dodge the whole issue of anatomical correctness, since they can claim that all distortions are purposeful. In the genre I am discussing here, there is a rather low ceiling to any distortion, since the figures are meant to look as human as possible. The figure is therefore not a malleable form, used for self-expression; it is given form that must express itself through certain conventions, conventions supplied to it by human nature. There is no hard and fast line here, and I am not claiming there is; but most will understand what I mean. If Carpeaux wanted to give his figure a certain emotion, he put that emotion in the face or limbs of his realistic figure. Most contemporary



sculptors don't attempt this, because it is so damned difficult. It is singly difficult to create the real figure, and doubly difficult to make it look like it is really feeling anything. So they claim to put the emotion in the larger lines and composition, by some sort of stylization. A few actually achieve this, to some degree. But, as I said, all this is basically outside the argument and review at hand, since Van *does* attempt the singly and doubly difficult task of direct representation of emotion.]

Richard MacDonald is one of the most successful realist sculptors in the world today, with major public commissions and huge sales.







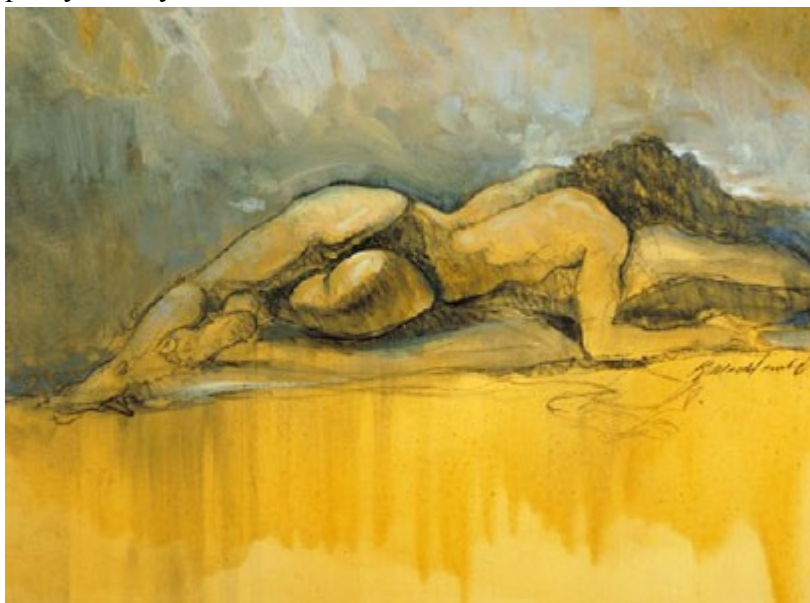
At first MacDonald showed real talent for gesture and for the nude body; also for exquisite patinas. "Doves," one his most popular works, is also one of his most successful works. But his faces were always suspect, and he was, from the beginning, teetering on the edge of bad taste. He soon fell off. He showed his hand early with a predilection for mimes and white-face, which spun out later into couples in high heels dancing the tango and the like. And then there was the gymnast—the square-headed Hercules in tights. MacDonald's gesture had become caricature.

Since then, he has taken a cue from Frederick Hart (a sculptor I will talk about in a moment) and begun to mass-produce his works in clear acrylic resin, also known as plastic. This is a sure sign that an artist has completely capitulated to modern vulgarity in all its forms. As a part of this descent, his obsession with surface has overwhelmed his content, and the patina and surface marks have become more important than the subject. It is long since he began to hide the fact that he had nothing to say behind a flurry of flash and shine. Like most gallery sculptors, his gesture is now all manic motion, with no gravity.

Despite having a huge technical talent, he has devolved into a slick marketing phenom, plagiarizing himself with huge editions in all sizes. His galleries are now forced to hide his edition sizes, they are so embarrassing. At Greenhouse Gallery there is a \$62,000 half-life sculpture, the "Trumpeter," that I believe I remember has an edition size of 175. It is no longer listed in the literature. If you do the math that is almost 11 million dollars in retail for one sculpture. A sculpture with an ugly face. Great hands and arms, yes, but the face is not good. That is probably why he chose to cover it in white paint. And this is a fragment of an earlier work called *Joie de Vivre*. Should this edition sell out, MacDonald can just point it up or down into another size and order another 175 or so from the foundry.

Funny story. When it first came out this sculpture was called *Joie de Vie*. MacDonald and I were in the same gallery in Scottsdale and I pointed out to the director that his French was a bit off. Now, my French is far from fluent, but anyone who has done any reading knows that “joie de vivre” is a cliché. You don’t even have to have a French dictionary or a computer to look it up. It is in all English dictionaries, and not even at the end under “foreign phrases” or anything like that. It is listed under “J”.

Anyway, MacDonald is now also showing his drawings in galleries, and from these we can see pretty clearly his true artistic level.



Admittedly that is the worst one I came across, but none of them were good. Like many gallery artists, MacDonald graduated into fine art from illustration. That is why both his drawings and sculptures have no depth. They still look like ads for Coca Cola or Nike. In fact, that is what MacDonald now is: a fabulously well-paid ad-man for the PGA Tour and the IOC and so on.

Glenna Goodacre has less flash than MacDonald and a bit more soul, but she still never manages real beauty or expression. Her public sculptures like the War Memorial are successful without being memorable. They fulfill their function but do little more. Most of her gallery work is just hackwork, a rung above her Loveland foundry competitors but expensive bronze litter nonetheless. If I were king I would declare a ban on all slice-of-life sculpture—boys on skateboards and old men on park benches with dogs and things like that.



The last thing a crowded world needs is permanent people, cast in bronze, especially when they are so utterly banal. A new Carpeaux might be allowed to add a denizen or two to the permanent population, but the entire Santa Fe output should be melted down and used for something useful, like bedknobs or bottlecaps.

To be fair, Goodacre has done some attractive work. “He is they are”, despite the corny title (and even cornier title explanation—it came to her in a dream) is a fairly compelling piece, even if the lower legs are too short.



Her maquette for the "Philosophers' Rock" is wonderful: it is too bad the full-size piece lost every bit of its charm. And her reclining nude "Summer" is pleasant and appealing.



I could see putting it by my pond, had I a pond. But "Summer" also proves my point. Its face, breasts,



hands and feet, though good, are not *really* good. Had I the sort of money that Goodacre's clients have, I would buy some sculptures from previous centuries, which are just as affordable and which often are *really* good. Or I would buy Van's work.

Bruno Lucchesi has done a handful of nice little terracottas in his long life, but hardly enough to justify his inflated reputation. In the 19th century he would have been laughed at as a clutz, but in the 20th he was the cream of the crop.



Lucchesi has a knack for overworking, for smoothing any accidental expression out of his figures. One can see this in his technical books, where he occasionally has something going on in his middle stages, purely by chance, that is always gone by the time he is finished. Apparently this is invisible to the man himself, who believes that a monotonous, though mottled, finish is the sign of the master. Like many he finds something soothing in a pinched mediocrity.

Frederick Hart was much like MacDonald, or rather they ended up in nearly the same place. Hart's clear plastic sculptures and bronzes have the same strengths and same weaknesses as MacDonald's works—they have unattractive faces, elongated and slightly off, with overcomplex patinas and surfaces that have been overtooled. Everything has been overprocessed, overpackaged, overpatined, overnumbered and overpriced. Underneath this surfeit is a big fat nothing of content and emotion. Any

expression or emotion is false, garish, and usually in bad taste. Hart added to this by being in bad taste about Christianity. Possibly there is nothing worse than bad religious art, especially in the age of mass media. Hart's late work looks like it should be sold on the Home Shopping Network, or on the PTL Club. The whole clear plastic idea was a trainwreck.



The only place you should buy plastic sculpture of the Pope or of Jesus is at the mall or the State Fair, and it should cost no more than 39 cents. All this was prefigured in Hart's only great work, *Ex Nihilo*, which, despite being competent and even beautiful in parts, lacked any real strength of character. Only the Pan gargoyle has any expression; the rest of the figures look like pretty people doing yoga. Hart mistakes writhing for feeling. It isn't enough to arch your back or have wind in your hair, as the great sculptors understood. Hart's figures don't make you feel anything, unless you are used to being cued by *Little House on the Prairie* and shampoo commercials. And like MacDonald, Hart plagiarized himself heavily throughout his career, selling fragments of *Ex Nihilo* to the end.

Alexander Stoddart is by far the biggest talent on my list, in my opinion. There are two talents he doesn't have, though. One is a talent for updating his website. The other is for emotion.





To be fair, he doesn't care much for emotion in sculpture, so I am admittedly critiquing him by my own standards, standards he dismisses. He is a classicist, and for him classicism is about decoration,

elevation, and emotional distancing. In this he is perfectly successful and therefore critically untouchable. However, I still prefer Van's work to his, since Van hits on three cylinders while Stoddart hits on two. Van's work is decorative, technically beautiful, and emotional all at once, and I like art that does all three simultaneously. Stoddart finds most emotion like Van's to be pollution, and that is his prerogative. But I find only fake or forced emotion, as in Hart or MacDonald, to be pollution. Genuine emotion exists and can be perfectly wed to form, and this is the highest art for me. Stoddart's Mercury's and Diarmid's are fantastic, but they leave me a bit cold. It may be that gods and demigods are supposed to leave us cold, but maybe not. The Greeks didn't think so, and they are considered classical, last time I looked.

Now, Van has not posted much of his sculpture on the internet. Some of these photos I will use are snapshots I took years ago. He hasn't even thought to steal images from his galleries' websites, as I have done for him here (see "Vanquished", below, which I offer here courtesy of Greenhouse Galleries). He is apparently too busy reading Chesterton and the Church Fathers to bother to post images of his best work. He is still posting a bad photo of his plaster cast of "Repose", when he has a stunning bronze with a great patina sitting around somewhere. But I say, even working with what I have on the internet, I can show you that he is better than all those I have critiqued above.

As a lead-in to that, I must first talk a little about painting. I am not going to list the top figure painters and chop them into tiny bits—I have done that in other papers. I am simply going to post a couple of samples, in order to show my method of judging. Once I have made that clear, I can apply that method in the same way to sculpture. It is my contention that most viewers have no idea how to judge a figure painting or sculpture. As I have said before, almost everyone seems to me to be judging on peripheral concerns and missing the main line. I have claimed that figure painting is not about color or brushwork or edges or reflected light or politics or decoration. So what is it about, precisely? Could I be more specific? I could indeed. Let us look at three figure paintings, the first by Pino, the second by Dan Gerhartz, and the third by Van.





By market considerations, they are ranked just as I have listed them here. Van makes a little money, Gerhartz a lot more, and Pino even more. I would reverse that order, and here is why. Go to the eyes first. What are the eyes in the Pino telling you? Well, I have chosen one of the few Pino's where you can see the eyes, but even here there is nothing going on. It is a blank stare. Every time Pino has a girl looking at you, she is posed looking absolutely face-on and her expression is zero. She has on so much mascara you can't see the whites of her eyes anyway. And her eyebrows are totally level and her mouth is level. Pino calls this one (tongue in cheek, I hope) "Mixed Emotions". Yah, she's a real mystery, that one. The biggest mystery, though, is why she is wearing a white apron with black hose and pumps. She's not even in the kitchen, but if she were those black pumps wouldn't be very handy. She might slip in some spilled milk or something, *Oh Daddy*.

The reason all his "women" are painted face-on is that there is no woman there. These are cookie-cutter paintings produced from mannequins and standard poses. All Pino has to do is change the wig and the apron, surround his lovely mannequin with new pots and flowers and throw pillows, and he has a new "original". Anyone with an ounce of feeling or intelligence could recognize that these are Stepford wives. There are a thousand dead giveaways, even to someone who doesn't paint, but the primary giveaway is the eyes. Always look at the eyes first.

Dan Gerhartz is what Pino would like to be, if he has any soul at all. Like Pino, Dan likes lots of color, pretty young girls, and lots of stuff in the background. The difference is Dan knows what he is doing. Dan uses bright colors but knows how to harmonize them. He knows how to create a

composition to contain all his flowers and drapes and candles. He knows how to direct all his loose brushwork into a lovely mess. And he knows how to choose models to achieve his goal. This immediately puts him lightyears beyond Pino. The only problem comes when we look into the eyes. We don't find much there, for the simple reason that Dan is no longer looking there. To be fair, he used to. His early work has more strength, and it is precisely because the eyes were more alive. Dan hadn't yet become obsessed with the paint, so he was still looking the girl in the eyes. She was telling him things, and through him, us. But now, as you can see, Dan is more interested in the color harmonies and the brushstrokes—which are admittedly lovely. Unfortunately, the eyes have gone almost dead. Not mannequin-dead, as with Pino, but approaching that. They are dead not because Dan has started relying on mannequins. No, they are dead because Dan is married: he can't risk feeling anything for this woman or girl. He can't risk letting his wife know that this woman or girl might feel anything about him. So he looks away, at the lovely brushstrokes curling so seductively. And we are left hungry for content.

Now we come to Van's painting "Twilight." This painting is so far beyond anything Pino or Gerhartz has ever done or imagined that I can't believe I am even on this page having to argue for it. This is not a mannequin. You are not looking at the background or the drape or the brushstrokes. If you have a scintilla of spirit you are asking how it would be possible to paint a head with more beauty or expression. This is like a head by Titian or Velasquez, though I can't think of many heads by them that have this kind of subtlety or depth. Apparently this kind of achievement in art is now so far beyond the experience or expectation of anyone that it simply fails to register on the chart. People pass it by without a flicker of recognition, as if they are passing in a speeding car and Van is a unicorn in a pasture of mules.

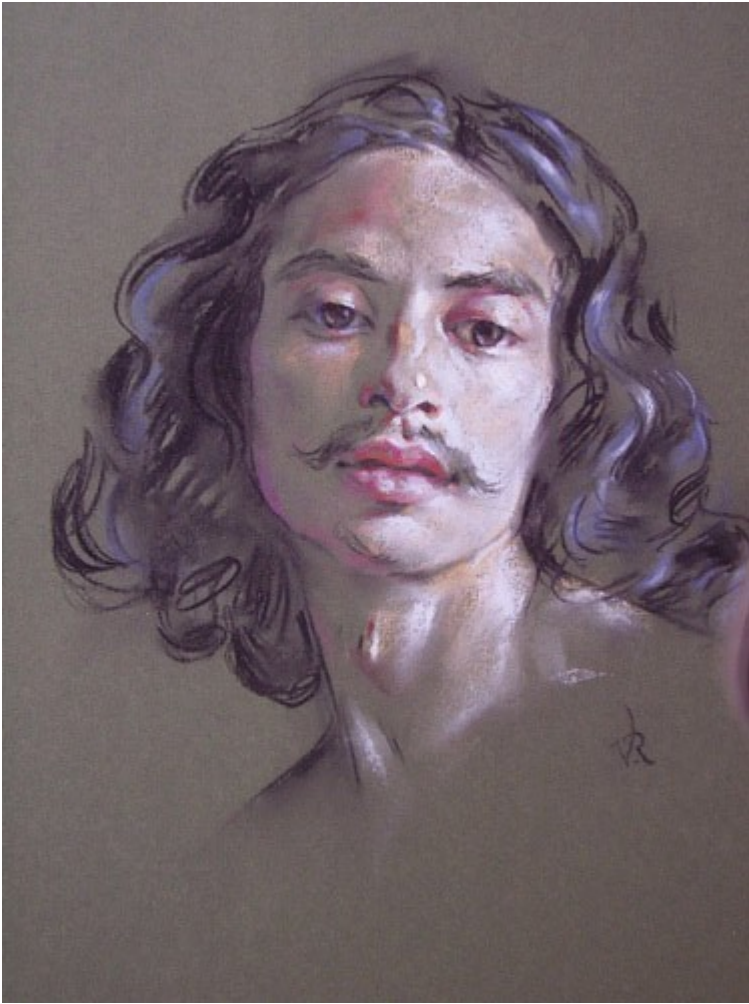
The artistically blind will say many things in response, I know, for I have heard it all before. They will ask me how I can tell them to look at the eyes and then show them a painting where the eyes are half shut. They will say that this man isn't doing anything. He is just tilting his head a bit. If Pino's girls are pretty and vapid, why isn't this guy just pretty and vapid? For these people, one head is pretty much the same as another. It is a miracle they can even get through the day, they are so terrible at reading signs. One wonders how (or if) they tell their husbands from the mailman. One really wonders how they keep from falling into holes. Actually, come to think of it, most of them don't. They have been falling through a big hole all their lives.

Nor is this one painting an accident or an anomaly. Look at some others from this series.









I still can't believe how good these pastels are. They are neither overworked nor underworked. They don't look like Old Master rip-offs, they look like genuine Old Master works. Meaning, they have that quality without having anything derivative in them.

Or how about this charcoal study?



This is also a real study for a larger painting of multiple figures, so in that way it is like the Old Masters' drawings as well. It was not produced to mimic some effect, it was not done as a homage or licked into some sort of fake perfection. It is a real sketch, and has all the of charm and immediacy of a real sketch.

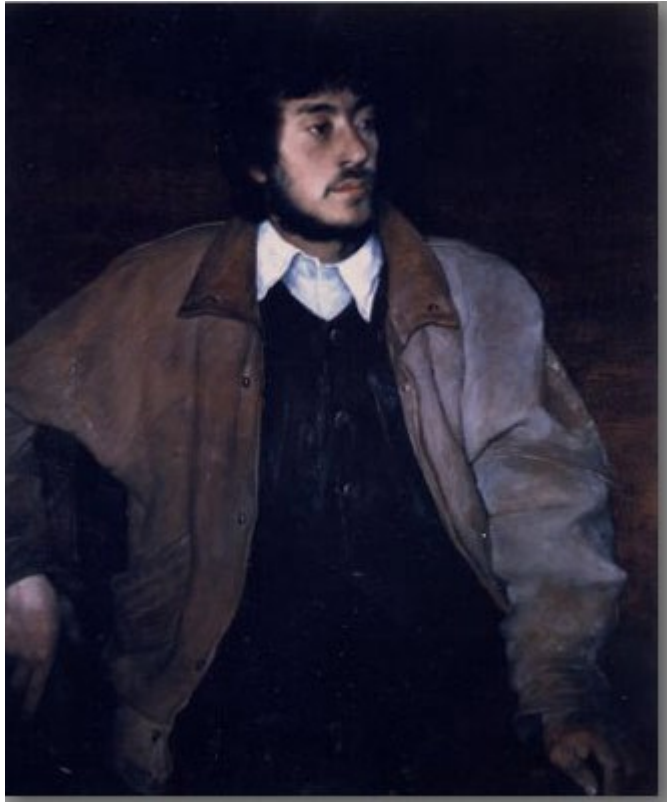
Or look at his full figures. This one is unbelievable.



I cannot convey to you the power of this 96" work in a 6" scan, but even here it is clear that we are in a world unlike the one we are used to with contemporary realism. A few others like Anthony Ackrill and so on are beginning to attempt this sort of thing again, but no one else is coming close to this.

I know that those who are judging us all from scans will not be convinced. They will think, "Yes, but Van has a lot of middling work up, too. He is just like all these other realists: halfway back, but no better. All these websites are pretty much the same. A few decent works, at best, but nothing to get excited about." Well, if I had seen nothing but thumbs pages, and weren't looking very closely, I might agree. But what I am struggling to get across is that there *is* a difference. It is clear in person, but it can be discovered even from the websites, if you do a little work. You have to cull out the best works from each artist's site and then do a direct comparison. Van's worst works are just as bad as everyone else's worst works. Hell, even Rembrandt's "worst works" thumpage would leave you with a bad taste in your mouth. But it is the best works you have to look at. There are some other living realists doing some good work, but you can look all day and not find works that compare to the ones I am posting here by Van. In my opinion, only someone like Yuqi Wang bears direct comparison, and only because he is technically beyond Van in some ways. But I believe Van is even more expressive than Yuqi.

To make it as difficult for Van as possible, let's do a direct comparison with Yuqi.



I haven't seen all of Yuqi's best work in person, but I have seen some of it, and I have a lovely book he sent me with terrific photos. Yuqi knows some things Van doesn't about paint quality and finish and light. No one would claim that Van is more technically advanced in any way, except maybe in line quality. But for me Yuqi's heads aren't generally as expressive as "Twilight". These two pictured are among my favorite heads from Yuqi's *oeuvre*, and they are both stunning. But the technique is perhaps more stunning than the expression. They are beautiful, calm, and deep, but they don't tear your heart out like Van's best heads do. Whether Van is calm as in "Twilight," or amazed as in "The Prodigal," he is at the very pinnacle of expressive capability, and his technique is everything it needs to be.

I don't think Yuqi has too much technique, but it is certainly possible to have too much technique. Think of Nelson Shanks, or even, in a different way, Dan Gerhartz. Technique can outstrip the subject, and in contemporary realism, it often does. More technique would not help Van's best figures; in most cases it would harm them.

Yuqi's technical abilities are so stunning here that I fear some will still not follow me. They will be caught in Yuqi's formidable headlights. So let me peel back a layer and try to be even more direct. What Yuqi achieves that is so rare, beyond his technique, is that he invests his sitters with intelligence. So many of even the finest technicians cannot do this. Both Kora and Lee, above, look beautiful and intelligent and interesting. They are not just real, they are individuals and they are fully aware. But, even so, they are just sitting there, in the main. They are not expressing much of a mood, either with face or limbs. You get very little emotional cue from either one: none, I would say, from Lee, and only

a twitch of haughtiness from Kora. They seem to be posing for the artist and are not even fully themselves. They are slightly self-conscious. The pose and setting does not seem to be chosen primarily to express a mood. It is chosen for other reasons or effects. For instance, is Kora's hand spread like that because it is something she does? Is it a natural thing that expresses her personality directly? Or is it something that the artist directed, for a compositional effect, like the vertical position of the instrument in the other hand?

It must occur to anyone that this is intentional on Yuqi's part. Possibly he agrees with Stoddart that emotion is a weakness of some sort. It is a sign of the immediate in a form that should be timeless. Or possibly it is an oriental convention: they take great pride in being more stoic, more inscrutable, than occidentals. Whatever the cause, the effect is that Van's work has a stronger mood, at least to my eye. Van may be giving himself away too much for the Chinese taste, but to my mind that is the artist's job. I want that connection open, not closed. Besides, most who want to express themselves can't do so. Most who value the connection cannot create it. In fact, I would call it the rarest skill. Technical skill is rare. Making a head alive and intelligent is even rarer. Making it also feel is the rarest of all.

Let me be crystal clear. I am not critiquing Yuqi here: he is mostly beyond any critique of mine. He is a great master with his own agenda and his own desires and his own way. I am simply stating a personal preference when it comes to treatment of subject. I am showing the reader how I look at these paintings, and that view may be worthless or worthwhile, depending on the reader. Some will agree and some will disagree. For some few my comments may cause some sun to rise somewhere, while for many my comments will be like an asteroid in the eye. I accept that like I accept the air I breathe. How could it be otherwise?

At any rate, I hope that some of you will now have a better idea what I am looking at in these paintings. In "Twilight," Van's man has full signs of life: he is thinking something, and that something is not, "Gee, I wonder why my apron keeps catching on my garter belt?" Van's people may or may not be beautiful, but they are intelligent. They are real because they are conflicted, or passionate, or amazed, or ambivalent. If they are none of these things, it is because they have a serene depth. A serene depth is not to be confused with a vapid stare, and yes, some people can tell the difference. Some people do not try to shake hands with wax dummies.

So let us return to the sculptures. As astonishing as Van often is as a painter, he is, I think, even more astonishing as a sculptor. Let's start with this plaster self-portrait (why oh why does he not have a pic of the bronze, which does exist?)





No one, absolutely no one, is doing heads this gorgeous these days. Stoddart comes close, but again, he lacks the expression. His male heads are just as beautiful, maybe, but they lack this kind of life. The rest of the top names don't even come close. Goodacre's best male head is the big Indian, but he is neither this beautiful nor this expressive. Sabin Howard can technically do what Van does with a male figure, but he hasn't got the models or the expression to match him. If this isn't clear at first, go to Howard's drawing section on his site. While Van can draw better than Liberace or Parrish, Howard is posting a Codex rip-off. Here is the direct comparison.

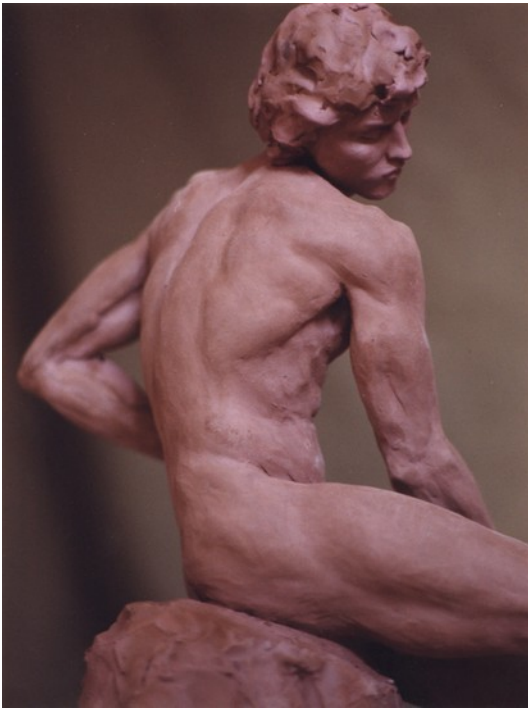
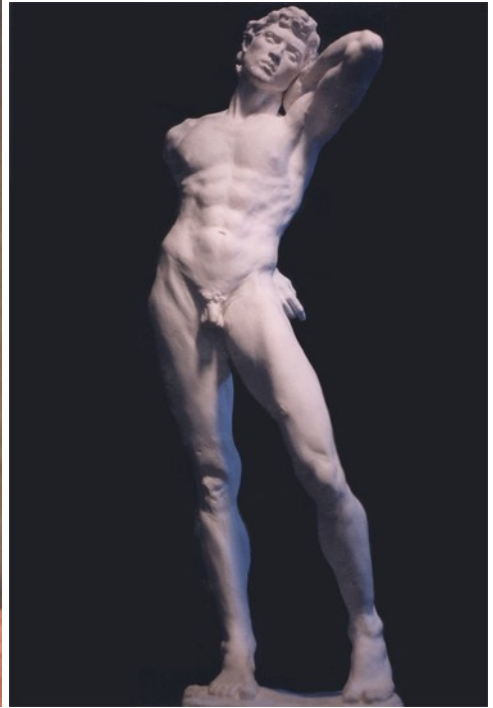




[Sabin must have read this article because he took down his drawing and immediately went to a macromedia presentation, where you can't download material. When my website was shut down by Yahoo and I had to rebuild, I lost my copy of Sabin's drawing. I guess you will have to take my word for it that Van draws better than Sabin. Or you can visit both their studios. I highly recommend that.]

But let us return to Van's self-portrait. Look at the eyebrows in Van's work. That is where the action is. Subtle cues tell us, "pain." The surface of the sculpture is stopped at the perfect point, neither too smooth nor too rough. And the hair is likewise in the perfect state of finish to support the expression without usurping it. Van has instinctively done everything right, all at once. I can't stress too much the rarity of this.

You will say, it is one thing to do everything right in a head, another entirely to do everything right in a full figure. And I agree with you. But Van does everything right in full figures, too. Look at these three.



Now, Van hasn't done me or himself any favors with these photos. He does make us work for it.

Nonetheless, a trained eye should stop and say, “Hold on just a darn minute, something is going on here, and it isn’t a grab for my purse.” You just don’t see work like this anymore, and you shouldn’t need a macromedia presentation to cue you to this fact. Look at the amount of expression Van has achieved in this clay original of “Thanatos,” the last one pictured. So subtle and so lovely. A tiny piece of absolute perfection. This clay is not overworked, it is not crushed into a soulless lump of decoration, a bauble for the ignorant. It is not fancified with toolmarks or tarted up with meretricious motion and swirls. It was not created as an anatomical study or a technical *tour de force*. It is calm and simple, a delicacy fit for a high taste.

As another example, look at this portrait of a young woman.



I take the blame for this amateur photo, which I took myself. Thank goodness I did, or we would have no record of her at all. Even through the too-heavy shadows you can see that this is sculpture on an entirely different level than we have become used to in the 20th century. This is like one of Bernini’s “speaking likenesses.” This is not an idealized head, or a too-pretty child. It is a real woman, with thought captured in her face, with a word almost on her lips. Once again, it is the eyebrows, and those little tilts and turns, that are so telling. Her skin is perfect, with the smoothness of skin, but not the oversmoothness of polished stone. She is an individual, with that personal nose and chin of hers—real

but not perfect.

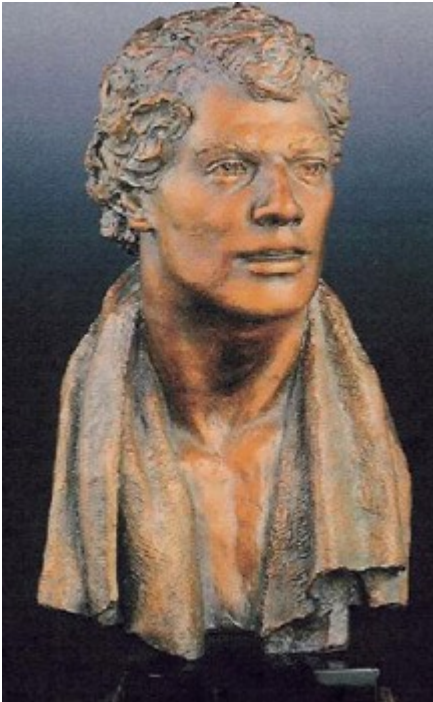
Compare her to Goodacre's women. They all look slightly dopey, as if someone has run a hose up their necks and siphoned out all the contents of their heads (many are overpolished, like the fragment here). They are the female counterparts to her Reagan sculpture. Consider for a moment one of her best sellers, "Chapeau Nouveau."



Great body, nice technique by Glenna, but that face is right out of Pino (and the hat doesn't help—who wears floppy hats in the nude?—no one, not even on nudist beaches). And the pose turns it into a complete cliché. Women don't stand like that anymore, unless they are in tight shorts on a USO stage, making fun of themselves. I love the past possibly more than anyone alive, but this is unintended camp, not nostalgia. "Chapeau Nouveau" inhabits an artistic no man's land between pin-up and serious nude.

Or compare Van's men to Goodacre's "Athlete".





This guy looks like Robert Redford, if Redford had an IQ of 40. Witness those eyes, dear reader: mannequin eyes. The tension in the eyebrows, combined with that slack lower lip, creates not intelligence but confusion. He looks like Joey Tribbiani trying to subtract 319 from 4562. And Goodacre really is better than the other gallery sculptors, again. I am not saying she doesn't deserve to be at the top of the known field. I am saying that the field is very very thin.

Unfortunately, this thinness doesn't make it easily penetrable. The galleries have somehow found a clientele for mediocre work, but they haven't found a clientele for really good work. I know this sounds counterintuitive to all the businesspeople out there, but there it is. The cream doesn't rise to the top, since no one is shopping for cream. All the people with taste were driven out of the realist market decades ago, and they haven't yet returned. Van isn't the first young artist to discover this. I have seen many catalogs over the years from the major sculpture competitions, and there is occasionally a real stand-out, some young man or woman whose sculpture turns your head like Van's does. But for some reason these stand-outs get ignored by the judges, the galleries, and the clients, and in a few years no one has ever heard of them. They have been forced into advertising, or have stuck their heads in the oven, or something.

So when people say to me, "C'mon, Van is what, 32? He has to pay his dues," I say, "I wish it were that simple." I wish to god that all he had to do is keep at it. Show me the young man or woman who has kept at and eventually forced the market in his or her direction—meaning, found a clientele for good work. The ones who eventually become successful are the ones who give the market what it wants. They dumb down to the given level and start supplying the ever-present demand for Reagan statuettes or plastic Jesuses or couples dancing in high heels or Native Americans in big blankets. Real art would look out of place in a contemporary realist gallery—*does* look out of place—that is why you



don't see it. The other reason is because it doesn't sell.

The reason it doesn't sell is because, in the rare case it is accidentally exhibited, it is entirely too subtle for the modern eye. Most modern people need to have their arm chewed on for a while before they will cough up any dough. They need bright lights and slick literature and guarantees of authenticity and investment. They need to be assaulted with colors or politics or fat brushstrokes or shiny varnish or footwide frames or celebrity endorsements. A simple work of art is under the radar of such people. A heartbreaking twitch of an eyebrow like in Van's "Twilight" is invisible in the maelstrom of vulgar eddies pulsing through the contemporary gallery. The client is washed along in a filthy sea of false superlatives and faux-talent and hasn't time to breathe much less swim to any real shore.

I do believe that there remain clients out there for work such as Van's. But the realist galleries are, for the most part, simply not addressing them. It is not a market easily mixed, either. You cannot appeal to morons in the morning and intellectuals in the afternoon, from the same gallery. It is like having a restaurant that is both smoking and non-smoking, with only a screen in the middle. The non-smokers resent the smoke and the smokers resent the fresh air. By the same token, people with taste do not want aproned and pumped semi-tarts looking vapidly at them from the walls, anymore than (I must suppose) the tasteless want smart people looking at them from the walls, making them feel stupid. Which is as much to say that Van's clients will not want to have to sift through rooms of garish trumpery to find him, anymore than Pino's clients would want to have to wander through rooms of dark and dreary Old Master paintings and sculptures to find a sunny mannequin in lipstick and push-up bra.

As I have said before, part of the problem lies in the fact that no one ever says anything substantive anymore. The realist market exists without a spot of criticism. Sure, the avant garde dismisses it as a whole, but no one even takes the time to make fun of Pino, like I have. There are no pasquinades, no public lampoons, and precious little shop talk. This allows the market to sail along with the impression that it is a serious business. It is really a strange state of affairs, if you think about it at all. When in history has any business been so insulated, especially art? Think of all the criticism the Impressionists had to wade through, or even Sargent, with his Madame X controversy. Or Whistler, by god. Now the current wisdom seems to be that realism has suffered so much from Modernism that it is best left alone, like a rabbit that has been mawled to within an inch of its life by a pack of greyhounds. Best leave it to die, or to crawl under a bush and lick itself back into the world.

I don't see it that way. I believe that the ill-formed blanket dismissals of the avant garde should be forced back down its throat: that the critics in that corner should be told to make sense or shut the fuck up. But the silence within realism is just cowardice. We aren't doing realism any favor by letting it be dominated by Pino and Thomas Kinkaid.

The average client never hears a bad word, never hears a peep of dissent, so he assumes that he is on the right track. He is never shown how to take a closer look at something that is right in front of his face. When has anybody even bothered to take the time to do what I have done here, putting images and words together with an opinion that goes in a definite direction? It is considered impolite and impolitic of me to attempt it. Better I should let art history wander off into another swamp, since I

would be limiting its freedom if I suggested it go in another direction. Better let the client waste his money as he sees fit, since he will not thank me for ruining his past investments. So what if he is a better man tomorrow? Perchance he does not want to be a better man, only a richer one, and I am useless in that pose.

I will close by being even more transparent, if that is possible. When people start talking about paying dues, I have to wonder if they know what they are saying. Paying your dues in sculpture, for instance, is a hell of a lot more than keeping your hands wet with clay all day, or keeping your nose up, or keeping resumes in the mail. To even get started with a gallery, you have to have some bronzes. You can't sell piles of dried clay or wax. Now, bronzes cost almost as much for the artist as they do for the client. Foundries don't work on spec, you know. And banks don't give loans to artists. Nor does the NEA, or any other organization. Realists are out of all the loops from the beginning. So what happens is that a young sculptor pays all his dues—which he may have earned by waiting tables for several years, for instance—to make a few bronzes. He pays some more dues to get photos and cards and websites, in order to get a gallery. But if nobody buys those initial bronzes, he cannot afford to make any more, and he goes under.

You will say, the same thing happens everyday in every business you can name. People take their shot, and many tank. That's right, but normally it is the ones with inferior products who tank. Or the ones with inferior PR. Good art in a good gallery should sell. Well, it's not selling, and the problem is with the market itself. Remember the movie *Amadeus*, and the line where Salieri says to Mozart, "My dear Wolfgang, if the public does not like ones work, one must accept the fact." Well, as you sit in the audience, do you accept the fact for Mozart? Of course not. You think, those stupid Austrians. You think, what else could Mozart have done? He created incredible music, he presented it at court—the greatest PR possible—and still he basically failed, as a business. He went broke, got depressed, and ended up in a common grave at 35.

The artistically blind will have an answer for this, too, for I have heard it again and again. "Well," they will say with a shrug, "If the Emperor Joseph couldn't get it right, how do you expect the prole Americans to do better? You are only proving that the problem is eternal. Why should Van find it any easier than Mozart?"

And I can only answer, "Quite so. Best to admit that the world is a pisspot and always was, getting worse in fact. Best not to try to do better. For that matter, why even try to create great works? Why not just jump into a common grave to start with, as a matter of efficiency?"

This is what the avant garde has done, you know. They have considered the fact and found it impractical to start down a road where they must lop off their ears or die a pauper at the end. There is no educating the buyer, or shaming him into the proper purchases by any old-fashioned means. So rather than jump into a common grave right out of university, they let the great works lie and they go another road altogether. It would be as if Mozart had seen it all coming and had had the foresight to go into shoe repair or plastics. I suppose this is what we must want, if we are consistent. No use watching romantic movies and calling the Austrians idiots. It was Mozart's fault for expecting to make a living. He was a fool and that is that. We now know better. We know not to expect anything, and we are never disappointed.

But there is another answer, and it is not so jaded or illogical. We are not in an Austrian court run by an inbred family of fools; nor are we in a nation or a world where intelligence is utterly extinct. A few dozen people out of the billions in the world might make the comparatively small effort to discover new talent and invest in it. Rather than wait for some gallery to send them a flier, or wait to see an ad in a magazine, or wait for some institute or foundation or agency to spend their money for them, or wait for some self-anointed expert to tell them what is hot, they could show some personal interest in the fate of the world. Just as people used to take the time to raise their own children, rather than let the schools and media do it, some few of them used to get upon their own legs, walk over to the artists' studios on the poor side of town, and make their own judgments. If they didn't know what they needed to know, they studied. They read a book, for instance. And they talked to real people, face to face. Not salesmen, but the artists themselves. In doing this, they came to understand both character and quality.

Clients will now travel the world to visit galleries and golf resorts, but if I suggest they visit some artists' studios directly, they look at me like I suggested they visit sweatshops or ammunition factories. They are flabbergasted. Their main concern seems to be that they might miss a tee-time, or that their Porsche SUV might pick up a nail in the tire. If they did anything that wasn't scripted and pre-approved, insured and shrink-wrapped, they might explode.

People will travel to the tiniest village, teetering on the edge of the map, if they are assured of a local ale or a special tribal corncake or a chocolate in the shape of a wombat. But if I suggest they drive 20 minutes from the big city in order to see an artist's studio, they look at me like I just sneezed on their Tag Heuer. They would apparently just as soon squeeze their caviar directly from the fish, kill the veal themselves, or take a guided tour at Roto-rooter.

You will say, of course they would. Why would they want to go to an artist's studio and be crucified? But I remind them that there was a time when artists and clients were both civilized human beings. Clients didn't show up at artist's studios with a mouth full of chewing gum, carrying throw pillows under their arms to be color-matched. They didn't show up talking on cellphones, fingering their palm pilots, talking about Tiger Woods and Barry Bonds and the bonds market and the *Da Vinci Code* and how that painting looks like Jennifer Aniston and that one like Joan Rivers at 30 and that one like Danny Devito.

It is hard to believe, I know, but less than a hundred years ago, clients might arrive at an artist's studio and talk about literature—not Harry Potter but Edith Wharton, for instance. They might take turns with the artist at the piano. They might discuss the plants in bloom and the birds in the garden, even if they weren't women. They might mention history or real museums or any number of non-annoying things. And if they did this, the artist might be charming, too. He might have some interesting things to say about any or all of these topics. He might play them a Schumann piece they hadn't heard in a while. He might show them a favorite book or an illustration by Arthur Rackham or a dark corner of a painting that he especially loved, all without making them feel in the least bit unwanted or out of place. And they might actually find the time better spent than in the 19th hole drinking martini after martini, or at the garage, buying another set of useless chrome rims for the Range Rover, or by the pool, watching the sun through their Chanel sunglasses as it turns their skin into sausage casing and their lips into rubberbands.

So, client and buyer, do the work! Nor let the modish maven shirk what his great forefathers did. The cradles have all been filled correctly, but you must discover the soul of the child within.

# THEATER OF THE ABSURD

*by Miles Mathis*

How is it that both sides of every debate fail to state the obvious these days? I have shown that both art and science are defined by misdirection and propaganda, so that we should not be surprised that politics is, too. Politics was the arena of invention for misdirection and propaganda, and art and science only borrowed their current forms from politics. The main remaining difference is that in art and science, the audience is assumed to have some residual intelligence: the misdirection has to be done behind a small cloak of some sort. But in politics, no such assumption is necessary anymore. The various media present us with a debate where both sides are speaking nothing but nonsense, and no one seems capable of passing through it.

Today's proof of this is the brouhaha over whether some Congresspeople were called niggers by individuals in a tea party rally. On one side we have the black Congresspeople themselves telling us it happened, and telling us that we need to "explore why this kind of divisive and reprehensible language is still making it into our political debate." On the other side, we have Andrew Breitbart saying that it never happened, and offering a reward to anyone who can prove it did.

Nonsense on both sides. To start with, seeing grown people afraid of printing a word as a word (not directed at anyone) is so infantile I never thought to see it in my lifetime. We think we have made great social progress because we can now say "crap" and "ass" on TV, but we have actually digressed since the 60's. Back then coarse language was frowned upon, but we were further from outlawing words than we are now. We are just a slight cough away from criminalizing the word nigger as hate speech, even when it is used like I am using it (undirected at anyone). This would be like outlawing the word "murder," even in reportage. Because murder is a crime, you cannot use the word, since it might incite someone to murder. The current arguments are about that logical. We have already reached that point in airports, where you can already be arrested just for saying the word "terrorist." For instance, if you said to a guard, "I am not a TERRORIST," and said the word terrorist with too much emphasis or volume, you would be arrested. Speech, words, and even inflection have already been criminalized, even when there is no threat or chance of riot or incitement.

But to move on. The Congressman's argument about divisive language is also nonsense. The "divisive language" didn't make it into "our political debate." A couple of people venting in a crowd is not a political debate. You are never going to be able to prevent people from shouting at each other, especially people who aren't capable of rational discourse. Since this describes most people on both sides of this and every other issue, this is the sort of thing we can expect. But it isn't important anyway. People who are pushed by the government are going to say angry things, and representatives should be able to take it. Anyone over 5 should be able to take it, since we are taught in kindergarten that sticks and stones, etc.



In situations like this the word “nigger” is now just a variant of “asshole,” and you can’t outlaw words. Unlike Breitbart, I have no doubt some people did use the word nigger, but they were probably just looking for the most hurtful word they could find. If it had been Barney Frank, they would have called him a faggot. That is, the word was used because it was handy. And because it has been put off limits, the word has only gained in its power. The recipient has told you beforehand that he will be highly offended, so if you want to be offensive, you know where to go. The whole scene is from the theater of the absurd. If blacks really want the word nigger to lose its heat, they shouldn’t outlaw it, they should use it in every sentence. As in, “Tell that nigger Miley Cyrus to nigger my nigger.” Or, “Spongebob is a nigger-deluxe and a terrorist-hugging twink.” Or, “I can’t decide if Grover or Elmo is the biggest nigger. One thing for sure: the Cookie Monster is a faggot-terrorist in a blue rug!” If you read enough sentences like that, you lose your ability to take these slurs seriously: the childishness of it all becomes very apparent. Richard Pryor was on the right track in the early years, and only his meetings with Jesse Jackson or somebody convinced him that outlawing words was the way to go.

If anyone had any logic left, he or she would see that Breitbart’s calling these guys liars was more important than anyone calling them niggers. There is more meat there. Judging someone for the color of his skin is ridiculous on the face of it, and most people recognize that these days. But judging someone for his truthfulness is still both logical and poignant. Which makes it that much more amusing when these Congresspeople fail to take umbrage at being called liars. They are so used to lying that being called a liar no longer seems like a slur. When someone judges them for their character, they let it slide; but when someone judges them for the color of their nose and ears, oh, that is the limit!

Like I said, I suspect these guys weren’t lying when they claimed they were called niggers. However, I do think they were misdirecting, since that is what they are paid to do. They (along with all white members of Congress and the media) are trying with every card they can play to keep the “debate” away from the real issues. They are trying to keep us arguing about forbidden words and the color of our noses, so that we forget to argue about real policy. They want the headlines to constantly be about race or sex or abortion or who fell into a mine or who slept with who, so that they don’t ever have to answer the hard questions about how much the Federal Reserve stole from us this year, or how many innocent people they have killed in the Middle East in illegal wars, or how they are continuing to cover up 911, or how Homeland Security is expanding into a Gestapo, or how the Constitution is evaporating from beginning to end.

In fact, any news story that includes Congress is misdirection from the get-go, since Congress is just a cardboard front. It is a cast of marginalized characters paid to look like it is doing something, so that you can send them letters they can throw in the shredder. You might as well petition the cast of *Lost* to do something about healthcare or foreign policy. You might as well gather and protest in front of Duncan Donuts or Chuck-E-Cheese. Congress is obsolescent. It is defunct. It is nothing but a professor emeritus, collecting a pension for filling a suit and having gray hair.

Congress shouldn’t be worried about about a few harsh words. Congress should be worried that it has

been hired to be the fake bad guy. Congress should be worried that when this really gets nasty, they are going to be the high profile villains. The rank and file have proved that they don't know who the enemy is, so it looks like they will go after the puppets first. Although Congress now just rubberstamps the policies made by other people, the angry citizens don't know that. The citizens still go to DC when they are angry and gather among the monuments, not realizing that DC is just a paper moon in front of a cardboard sea. It is a Disneyland of false targets, meant to attract the ignorant shooters. The real villains are in more secluded places, hiding behind layers of protection. The top brass have rows and rows of infantry and cavalry in front of them, and you can't even see them from the trenches.

You have to understand that the first line of defense for these people, well ahead of any line of pawns or privates, is the fake debate you read every day in the paper or online. You read some manufactured contest between two manufactured interests, not realizing that both interests are funded and scripted by the same people. In this particular case, Andrew Breitbart and these Congressmen are like two NFL teams, both paid by advertisers to knock heads for a few hours to keep your eyes off the main action. Any time you spend being offended by the fact that some nameless person yelled the word nigger is time you don't spend thinking about how the Feds just stole trillions from you, or how they stole these trillions to kill Iraqi and Afghani men, women and children in your name. It is time you don't spend thinking how your government, using money it stole from you, has become the worldwide leader in foreign and domestic terror, killing, torturing, jailing, and harassing anyone it wants to, including you and your neighbors. It is time you don't spend thinking about how it is even now hiring more thugs to make up more Blackwater-type private battalions that can bust into your home at gunpoint and charge you with anything they like, or shoot you dead.

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I am going to let that reminder hang on that crescendo and move on to another topic. There were two subjects in today's headlines I wanted to hit, the other one being Sandra Bullock's marital problems. Here again, no sense is ever spoken in the media. The gender feminists have used this as one more bomb to drop on all men. I watched *Saturday Night Live* on Hulu last night, and this topic made Weekend Update on two occasions. First, Kristen Wiig flashed a T-shirt and a handsign in support of Bullock, then Tina Fey used the subject as a quick lead-in to a general slur of men. According to Fey, Bullock is not suffering from an Oscar curse, whereby the winner of a Best Actress Oscar then gets cheated on by her husband, she is suffering from the curse of "being a woman"—implying that all men cheat on their women (and that no women cheat on their men). This is patently absurd in general, and is so absurd in the case of Sandra Bullock that it passes belief. Sandra Bullock married a guy covered in tattoos, who works on choppers for a living, and who was married to a pornstar before her, and we are supposed to be shocked to discover he is not a choirboy? We are expected to feel loads of compassion for her, but what did she expect? It is like marrying a lion and being surprised when your pet lamb goes missing or marrying a policeman and being surprised when your pet donut goes missing. C'mon. Make some sense, for crimony's sake!

Beyond that, it is ironic that Tina Fey chooses this same commentary to attack Bombshell McGee (Jesse James' new flame) for being tattooed, but never asks what Bullock was thinking in marrying someone who was the male equivalent of Bombshell McGee. If I married Bombshell McGee and then expected her to be a saint, I don't think Tina Fey, Kristen Wiig, or anyone else would feel a lot of solidarity with me. I don't think they would put my name on a T-shirt or flash me cutesy handsigns. They would think I was sleeping in a bed of my own making, wouldn't they—reaping what I did sow.

But it goes even beyond that. Sandra Bullock is known for being boy crazy. Nothing wrong with that, you will say. No, there isn't. There is nothing wrong with it, there is only something inconsistent in it. I lived in Austin in the 90's, and I saw Sandra around town quite often. She was always dating some new guy, Matthew McConaughey or Bob Schneider or somebody (neither of whom were known for being one-woman guys). She shopped at the same Whole Foods as me, and she would check me out as I ground my own organic free-trade Peruvian coffee or bought a bag of four-dollar pears. Again, nothing wrong with that. I have been told I look a bit like McCon or Schneider or Donovan, so I guess I am her type. But frankly I had no interest in being one in a long line of blonde-haired eye candy on the arm of Sandra Bullock. It works both ways, you know. So you can see why I might be able to see through this newest Hollywood fiasco. Women who have a lot of high-profile boyfriends, and who seem to be most attracted to the least dependable of them, don't merit a lot of compassion when their relationships blow up.

But it goes even beyond *that*. I can't believe actors still attack each other (male or female) for their sex lives. Actors are the biggest bunch of sluts ever. They have a lot of opportunity and most take it. Nor is this just limited to actors. When I was in Austin, nearly everyone was a slut. That is why they were there. Austin and Boston were and are known as the two best places to be single and under 35. Every night is a new encounter, and it is rare anyone refuses an opportunity. Again, I am not critiquing anyone, just stating a fact. You make choices and you have to live with them. I am not criticizing Sandra for liking alpha males, since most girls would do the same in her position. I am just pointing out the hypocrisy of dating or marrying those guys and then being shocked when they act like alpha males. They are just doing their job, and if they weren't doing it, someone else would. You might as well be shocked that dogs bark or that birds fly or that politicians lie. That is what they do, and it is your fault for expecting otherwise.

If Sandra wants to get involved with those guys, that is her business. I am only enraged when Tina Fey uses Jesse James to slur all guys. I am enraged that no one thinks to mention that Sandra Bullock may have had some responsibility in all this. And I am enraged when women imply that they are any better than us when it comes to sex. They aren't. In some ways they are different than us: they have different problems and make different mistakes. But in general they are just as confused and just as selfish and just as irrational. I know: I have dated *a lot* of them.

As a sort of tack on, I can't resist commenting on the inconsistency shown in Tina Fey's sketch with

Justin Bieber. Tina plays a teacher with a crush on her 16 year old student, and it is portrayed as all in good fun. Women, and society in general, needs to decide how it feels about this. The sketch was funny, but the mixed signals are NOT funny. People are in jail for this. Eighteen year old guys have been arrested for dating 16 year old girls, so it is not just a matter of mores or morals or funny taboos. It is a matter of law. Real teachers, of both sexes, have spent years in jail for this.

I can understand each side in this debate. There are arguments on both sides that make sense. Europe has chosen to pretty much give up on statutory rape. Sixteen year olds there can date whoever they want to. But here, 16 year olds are still locked up in little mating pens. They can date other 16 year olds or face real jail time. If we want to keep those laws, then it makes no sense to loosen the mores. It makes no sense to joke about it as if it is no big deal. We can't be strict and loose at the same time. We need to either be loose like Europe or strict like Saudi Arabia. It is the mixed signals that are the real tragedy and that cause the real problems.

I like Tina Fey in general. I think she is smart and funny and attractive and talented, and I think politically she is well-intentioned and often correct. However, she, like most contemporary females, is sending a lot of dangerous mixed signals, obviously without even realizing it. It used to be men that were applying the old double standard in their own favor, but now it is women doing it. Women want to be free to do anything they like, but they don't want to allow men to do the same thing. Tina is free to joke about a crush on a 16 year old boy, but can you imagine Fred Armisen doing a sketch where he joked about marrying Molly Quinn or Dakota Fanning? He'd be fired first, then ripped on every talk show, then visited by the FBI.

Men being selfish are losers and cads, but women being selfish are "empowered." Men act stupid and make mistakes, and they are dragged through the tabloid mud for months. Women act stupid and make mistakes, and everyone looks the other way. Every relationship disaster is assumed to be the fault of the man, and no one asks if the woman shares some responsibility. When Tom Cruise and Nicole Kidman split, for instance, not one person asked if Nicole had anything to do with it. She was the victim from the first word, despite the fact that almost no one knew what had really happened. For myself, I assumed they were both gay or frigid, and had been paired by their handlers for that reason. After some amount of time, they got sick of looking at each other, and asked to be re-assigned. Talk about no-fault. And yet the tabloids spun it endlessly as some moral failing of Tom. Nicole went on Oprah every other week and looked shunned and shamed, but her act was even more unconvincing than Tom's jumping up and down on the sofa.

Same for Brad Pitt and Jennifer Aniston. Jennifer admitted making Brad wait nine months before they had sex. If that doesn't stop you in your tracks, nothing will. That was 1999 and we are talking about actors. Normal people in their 30's wait, what, three to five dates, if that. Actors normally wait three to five minutes. Nine months? One or both of these people is frigid, and I am assuming both. No normal guy waits nine months for sex with his girlfriend. The most likely scenario is that Jennifer's hormones finally kicked in in her 30's, and Brad asked to be re-assigned to someone more gay or more frigid.

Only problem with that theory is that it means Billy Bob Thornton's whole sex thing is also an act, but Billy Bob is a good actor. Or maybe BB just wore Angelina out. I don't frickin know, or care. The only thing I know is that Jennifer wasn't anyone's victim. Hollywood relationships, like most relationships, are a series of disasters or fakes, and no one is going to convince me that the male sex is the fall guy in all this.

If women want stable relationships, they have to marry stable guys (who do exist). Why don't they? Because women are human beings, and human beings crave excitement. Stability is (often) the opposite of excitement. Women, like men, want both excitement and stability, so they waffle between one and the other. If they have more opportunity, they waffle more. Why can't the eternal problem be stated in these straightforward terms? Why do we always have to see the man portrayed as the goat and the woman portrayed as the angel? Simple: it is the woman now painting the picture. Men almost never write about sexual politics and women almost always do. There is an *Oprah* magazine, but there is no David Letterman magazine or Jimmy Kimmel magazine. We have no club. *GQ* and *Esquire* don't waste any copy fighting the gender war: they are too busy publishing soft porn and trying to get laid by floozies. Since the rise of online porn, no one looks at *Playboy* anymore, and *Playboy* was never a clear voice in the gender wars anyway. About the closest thing we had to a recent salvo was Christopher Hitchens' article in *Vanity Fair*, accusing women of not being funny, but [I have already shown](#) how pathetic that was.

It is sad when the strongest, most manly voice on our side is Camille Paglia, but I don't know where she has been the last five years. I lost track of all that when I gave up on *Salon* and moved into the real meat and potatoes of Infowars. The world has changed and a lot of these places like *Salon* don't understand it. Either that, or they have been taken over by the CIA. Camille, like Gore Vidal and lot of my old heroes from the 90's, still takes the Democratic party seriously. Vidal said recently that Obama was very smart and never lied. Conclusion: Vidal died and has been replaced by a CIA pod. In the same way, Paglia still hadn't seen through the whole charade as late as 2009, so she either hit an intellectual wall or has been visited by the spooks. Even Nader signed onto that whole cap-and-trade nonsense for a while, indicating a complete loss of his faculties. The world is changing so fast these older generations can't keep up. They are still functioning in the corruption levels of the 90's, and like Chomsky, they can't see the exponential increase since 911. That was the dividing line, and most of those past 60 really can't seem to get a handle on 911. Without coming to terms with that, they can't get a read on anything since then.

This is important, because Paglia, who wrote *Sexual Personae*, should be saying what I am saying. Instead she is letting her readers lead her, with columns that are just answers to her letterbag. It is as if she can no longer find her own feet. Worst of all, she is still looking for apologies for Obama. After a year like 2009, no intelligent person should be unclear about what is really going on. The events of the last decade have demanded that social critics become ever more critical, but Paglia was more pointed in the 90's.



It begins to appear that the next decade will not be a decade where we are led by intellectuals of any stripe. I can't say that discourages me. It is the populace that must rise up, and they are always led by their own. It will be Alex Jones and others like him that lead the *sans-culottes* of our own time. One only wonders where the similar counter-revolution in the gender wars will come from. What voice of non-partisan reason will rise up like Twain from the Mississippi boats, to tell these overreaching ladies to put their claws back in their gloves?

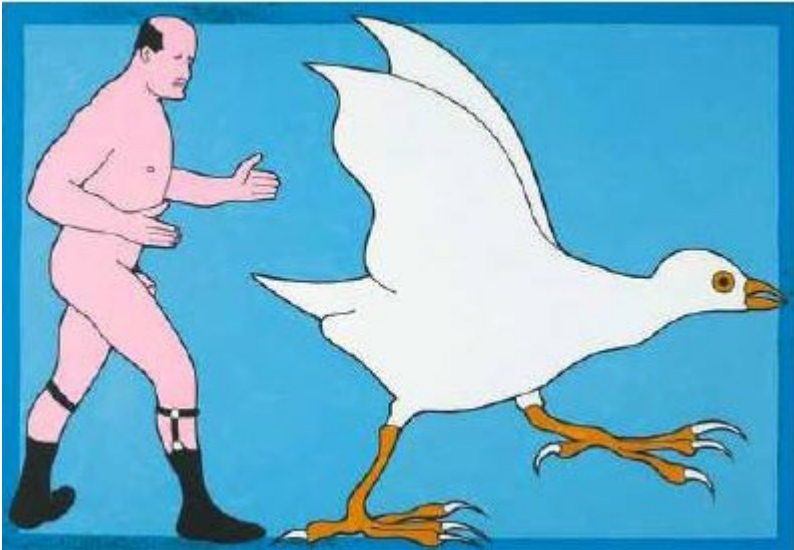
# CONTRA DAVE HICKEY

*by Miles Mathis*



Dave Hickey seems to be everywhere now. He will be here in Taos later this summer to talk about Dennis Hopper, and *Newsweek* just published a short article about him. Until recently, most of his fame was in his own mind and the minds of his followers, a smallish group. But now, at age 70, his renown is hitting a real climax and he is reaching a slightly larger audience. Why? It is hard to say, but I suspect it has to do with lack of competition. He has outlasted everyone. He is still partially mobile and partially conscious, and this puts him ahead of most of those in the arts. If you make it to 70 in any creative field in the modern world without being permanently knocked cold, you are guaranteed a gaggle of groupies and a long pre-obituary of false praise.

In researching this article, I have found him described as a genius, as a polymath, as an astonishingly good writer, as a bad boy, and as a superstar. But in reading his articles and listening to his speeches and interviews, I have not found any evidence for these superlatives. As with [Saltz](#) and [Schjeldahl](#) and [Danto](#) and [Carey](#), I have found instead only proof of the low standards of his readers.



This is one of Hickey's top ten favorite works of art, by John Wesley

Hickey's most widely cited book is *Air Guitar*, and this is apt because as a critic Hickey is like an air guitarist: he mimics the form without actually being a master of any instrument. As an air guitarist is to Christopher Parkening or Eric Clapton, Hickey is to a real critic or writer.

To show this, I will make use of one of his few papers online, an article from *Daedalus*, fall 2002, called "Buying the World."\* You wouldn't know it from the title, but in this article Hickey revisits his thesis of beauty and democracy from *Air Guitar*. He begins by asking why we speak of beauty at all. "First, we speak the word and respond to it because we are good democrats who value transparency and consensus." Notice that is his "first": he chose to lead with that, out of several answers. I point this out because the answer is neither pertinent nor true. What does being a democrat have to do with talking about beauty? Does Hickey mean to imply that aristocrats can't or didn't talk about beauty? Are democrats the only ones compelled to rank beauties? No, in fact the opposite is true. Democrats are the *least* likely to rank beauties or argue about beauties, since democrats (at least modern ones) are constitutionally opposed to hierarchies, and ranking beauties is hierarchical, by definition. That is what ranking means. As a matter of history, the argument of beauty was much wider, deeper, and vehement in past centuries, before democracy took root. As a matter of recent history, beauty is not talked about much anymore. It was a forbidden topic for most of the 20th century, which is precisely why Hickey got known for bringing it back into criticism in the 90's. Remember *The Beauty Myth*? That was also in the 90's. Beauty was brought up only to deny its existence and to browbeat those who were regressive enough to still believe in it. Most feminists still deny that beauty exists, as do most art critics. So Hickey's claim here is false in every possible way. It turns the truth on its head. Why does Hickey do this? Because it ingratiates him with his democratic readers. Like a politician, he uses words not to make any sense in a broader argument, but only to score emotional points.

Soon after this, Hickey says,

As Nietzsche would have it, these adjudications function as a public modality through which we

socialize our pleasures in ourselves.

No, Nietzsche would not have it like that, I assure you. Nietzsche would rip his eyeballs from his head before he would allow a sentence like that to go to press. Hickey had already quoted Nietzsche directly: “Anyone who tried to divorce it [beauty] from man’s pleasure in himself would find the ground give way beneath him.” So it is a mystery why Hickey would restate this idea in such cloudy language. That sentence reads like Danto, not Nietzsche.

Hickey then glosses the history of post-Renaissance ranking of beauties, to arrive at this conclusion:

The consequences of these speculations, however, was not the establishment of objective standards but a permanent and profoundly democratic revolution of the way we look at things.

We can throw out the “permanent” as excessively optimistic, unless we think that Hickey can predict the future. But even without it the sentence is false and exclamatory. It was not the historical argument about beauty that led to a bypass of objective standards, much less to the establishment of modern democratic or republican governments. It was the establishment of democracy, and the curious modern interpretation of equality, that led to a loss of standards. Once again, Hickey has the argument on its head.

Even more curious than this is the next progression of Hickey's argument, for he now quotes the Declaration of Independence (he does everything in this article but wrap himself in the flag and have his wife take a picture of him). He concentrates explicitly on the first seven words of the second sentence: “We take these truths to be self-evident.” This allows him to begin another foggy paean to democracy, but he doesn't bother to see that these seven words fatally clash with his thesis. He just threw out “objective standards”, remember, in favor of a “profoundly democratic revolution.” But I would think that self-evident truths must be fairly objective.

You see, Hickey is caught in a very transparent web of illogic. He wants his democratic revolution and his freedom to be subjective, but he wants his self-evident truths, too, for without them there would be no Constitutional guarantee of his freedom to be subjective.

He proves this very soon, when remembering how he had, as a child in school, changed the lyrics to “God Bless America”:

Somehow (probably thanks to the Second Continental Congress) we all felt empowered to propose our own aesthetic, and we did.

Hickey believes that the Declaration of Independence empowered him to do that, but if it did, it certainly didn't do so by talking of self-evident truths. Any solid truths, evident or not, tend to doom subjectivity. Garbling a song is no great transgression in anyone's government, but at higher levels Hickey's imprecision in argument must become important.

We see this again in one of Hickey's more recent speeches, which he gave in 2007 as part of the Innovator Series. He begins this speech in a rather foul mood, taking to task an art market that had become completely monetized and critically irrelevant. For a moment I was taken in, as he said, "How dare you refuse to make value judgments?" But then I remembered his whole career of sloppy subjectivity. To be specific, I remembered his critical introduction to the Site Santa Fe exhibit, which he judged in 2001, where he wrote,

I plan to mount an exhibition entitled Beau Monde: toward a redeemed Cosmopolitanism. I begin this project without any preconceived notion of what a beau monde—or a beautiful world—might be. \*\*

Yes, I can see the founding fathers saying something similar: "We plan to launch a country. We begin this project without any preconceived notion of what our country should be."

Hickey is wildly inconsistent. In his foul moods, he demands that other people should make firm judgments, be principled, have high standards, and so on, but when face to face with contemporary artifacts, he crumbles. He does not tell all the Site Santa Fe people to grow up and learn to paint or sculpt, to read a book, or to buy some depth somewhere; he does not throw all the crap out the back door onto the traintracks and cancel the exhibit for lack of art. No, he takes his fee, gives his lectures, and basks in the adulation, in his superstar status.

In his Harwood Museum catalog, he does not tell all these fake artists to go back to Hollywood, to their private jets and their big ranches and their Republican parties. No, he writes the required drivel, deflecting the eye off the trifling art and channeling it into hundreds of pages of cultural musings, simultaneously stroking the stars and the star-kissing phonies of Taos, smug in their bought relevance.

In defense of this, Hickey claims we need the "fashion trash and the art sillies." He said this in his KERA interview in Fort Worth, but didn't tell us why we need them. One must suppose *he* needs them because if art or criticism began to be based on some standards, he would be out of a job. The silly and trashy people now in the arts, both artists and administrators, are incapable of seeing through his act. They think he is a superstar. They think he is a great writer. So of course he wants to keep them around.

But the bigger problem is the misinformation constantly published, in oral and written form. Even while defending the fashion trash, Hickey implies that there is something else. He implies that the fashion trash is a necessary *part* of the whole. But it isn't. It is the whole thing. There is no "higher end" to contemporary art.

In an interview two months ago with Aimee Walleston for *The Moment*, Hickey is asked this question:

Is our culture ripe again for the refined beauties to go away and for the Mapplethorpe-esque gutter flowers to emerge again?



What? What refined beauties is she talking about? Could she name one? This question is misdirection. It makes the reader *think* that beauty is still allowed to exist in contemporary art. But this “refined beauty” of hers is a strawman. It is a strawman that Modernism knocked the stuffing out of a century ago. We haven't had any refined beauties in art since Sargent and Sorolla died in the 1920's. But these critics and academics have to keep propping the puppet up, claiming it is alive, so that they can keep hitting it.

Even worse, perhaps, are the false comparisons. Peter Schjeldahl says this in an article about Hickey:

To do Vegas with Dave is like having John Ruskin along on a tour of Venice.

Only those who don't know who Ruskin is, or who hate him, could read that without wretching. It is bad enough that critics now write about each other: more proof that the art is not worth reviewing, so review the writer or the museum or the frame or the gallery. Worse that we have Vegas and Venice in the same sentence. Worst that Ruskin, a truly great writer, should be dragged into this vulgar competition of falsehoods. It is like Schnabel comparing himself to Giotto or Michelangelo (as he has). Somewhere in hell, two more spokes are being prepared on the fiery wheel.

In my research on Hickey, I could find almost no true statement. Everything he says is false or pointless. Even in casual conversation, he cannot find a valid thought to utter. But of course, in a corrupt field, one must become corrupt, and the longer one stays in the field, the more corrupt one becomes. For example, in his KERA interview, he opens with a string of falsehoods. He is asked about the community of artists, and he says that “art is a social activity.” Wrong. Historically, visual art was not a performance art, like dance or theater. Great paintings were always created in solitude and silence, and still are. If visual art is now a performance, that is simply another sign of its strangulation by its sisters. Then Hickey says, “You don't ever find just one (artist).” Wrong. Hickey even brings up his own counter-example: Van Gogh. Van Gogh is famous for being a loner, as are a thousand other famous artists. But Hickey deflects this by mentioning that Van Gogh's brother was a dealer in Paris with lots of connections, as if that is to the point. Vincent only spent a few months in Paris before he fled back into his isolation, away from the suffocating society of phonies. After this, Hickey says that “It is an oral culture.” We hope he means our Modern culture in general, rather than art, since it would be ridiculous to claim that visual art is an oral culture. But it is no less ridiculous for a *writer* to claim that ours is an oral culture. If ours is an oral culture, why write? The truth is, ours is not an oral culture, it is an anal culture, and Hickey is just talking out of his ass.

Another example of Hickey's fondness for falsehood is his famous thesis, about to be promoted in his new book *Pagan America*, that America is “a vast pagan republic, not that there is anything wrong with that.” According to Hickey in *Newsweek*, “Martha Stewart contributes more to our civility than the Baptist Church.” As usual, Hickey is more interested in saying colorful things than true things. Martha once contributed something to commerce and entertainment, but she never contributed a damn thing to “civility.” With her insider trading, she only contributed to incivility. But the greater problem here is

with Hickey's use of "pagan", which is about as precise as Bob Guccione's use of the word. As we see from Hickey's Martha Stewart quip, he is using the word to mean "non-Christian" or "non-religious". The US is following Europe and becoming more and more secular. But this has nothing to do with paganism. The pagans were very religious and they took worship, culture, and art very seriously. Hickey should be arguing that America is post-pagan, since he is really comparing America to the late Roman Empire, when the upper classes in Rome no longer believed in the gods. My point is not an academic or semantic quibble, since my central and fundamental problem with Hickey and his defense of contemporary art is that he doesn't take it seriously. He has no apparent reverence for the past, the present, or the future, only an ability to use all three for short-term entertainment. His attitude is both irreligious and inartistic, where everything is a means and nothing is an end. This makes him and America neither Christian nor pagan. The pagans, whether we are talking about Greek and Roman pagans, Germanic pagans, Icelandic pagans, or any others, would all find the modern attitude toward art and culture and life to be diseased. Modern art would seem to them a profound sacrilege. The truth is, no culture in history was as debased as ours is currently, not even the Aztecs, who still took art and religion seriously. Not even the late Romans, who never corrupted the arts to the extent we have. Did the Romans ever build expensive museums and spend billions of dollars filling them with blinking lights and lotto tickets and cans of excrement. No. Did they take a talentless slave like Damien Hirst and turn him into one of the richest men in the world, simply as a joke? No. Did they publish libraries full of Theory and fake criticism, writing false and meaningless sentences on purpose, to deconstruct the past and present? No. Did they purposely destroy entire fields of enterprise, and forbid anyone from entering them, simply from envy and *ressentiment*? No. The "polymath" Hickey needs to reread his Nietzsche before quoting him again, since Nietzsche understood these things. Not only did Nietzsche see the lastman coming, in the form of people like Hickey, he understood that this lastman was unlike any man of the past. Modern America is not pagan or even post-pagan, it is post-cultural. It is the complete disintegration of all culture and civility and standard and truth. As art is now anti-art, culture is now anti-culture. It is the purposeful tearing apart of all natural bonds, the crushing of all natural desires, and the inversion of all truths of nature. Hickey is just another frontman in this disintegration, and he is a superstar only for those who hunger for the abyss.

\*<http://www.amacad.org/publications/fall2002/Hickeyweb.pdf>

\*\*<http://www.sitesantafe.org/pressroom/pressreleases/hickeypress.html>

# A Return to the Hockney-Falco Thesis

*by Miles Mathis*



a Hockney masterpiece

*Do you know how a man makes his way in the world? Either by the splendor of genius or the adroitness of corruption. He must burst like a cannonball into the ranks of his fellow men, or he must glide in among them like the pestilence.—Balzac*

In 1999 David Hockney first conceived the idea that the flowering of realistic painting, from before the time of the Renaissance, was caused by the use of lenses and other optical devices. The great leap from wooden Medieval representation to Renaissance naturalism needed a cause, and for Hockney this was it. Especially in studying artists like Van Eyck and Holbein (and later Ingres), Hockney could not believe that such heights of realism were attainable without technological help. Hockney could not “eyeball” such precise drawings himself, and if he could not do it, how could they?

Very soon Hockney had enlisted Charles Falco, a condensed matter physicist from the University of Arizona, as scientific ballast for his theory. He then published a book in 2001, *Secret Knowledge*, which explained this theory in greater detail, as well as illustrating the theory with drawings and paintings Hockney had done with the help of some of these optical devices.



Despite the fact that a large part of the artistic community and the scientific community found the thesis ludicrous and offensive, it was almost immediately worked into the syllabi of art and art history classes at all levels, including the undergraduate and graduate levels at university. Students in many courses all over the world are now taught this thesis as fact. This was achieved mainly through Hockney's stature and name recognition in the avant garde. As Tom Wolfe pointed out many years ago, the inner circles of *art moderne* are quite small and clubby, cultish even. Facts have never been of primary concern in this circle, and the coursework, like the propaganda, can be tweaked to include almost anything, the more absurd the better.

As for the public, they were, as usual, in no position to judge. They are helpless before any PR campaign, and the PR campaign of modernism has been one of the most successful in history. As just one recent example, take the 2003 film *Girl with a Pearl Earring*. Most would say this film promotes old-fashioned art, but much of it has the reverse effect. After being hypnotized for a half hour by Scarlett Johansson's lips, the viewer is shown Colin Firth, as Vermeer, using a camera obscura. Firth puts Johansson's pretty head under the coverlet, where she sees an image of the nearly finished painting. She gasps and asks if the painting is really in there. Firth laughs and tells her it is just an

image. But we have a rather large problem here. A camera obscura is not a camera as we know it, so there can be no image when there is no painting. In other words, the camera obscura would have to be pointed at the painting for there to be an image of the painting. No image could be stored! The invention of the proper plate and emulsion and so on were still centuries in the future, so there is no way there could have been any image in that box.

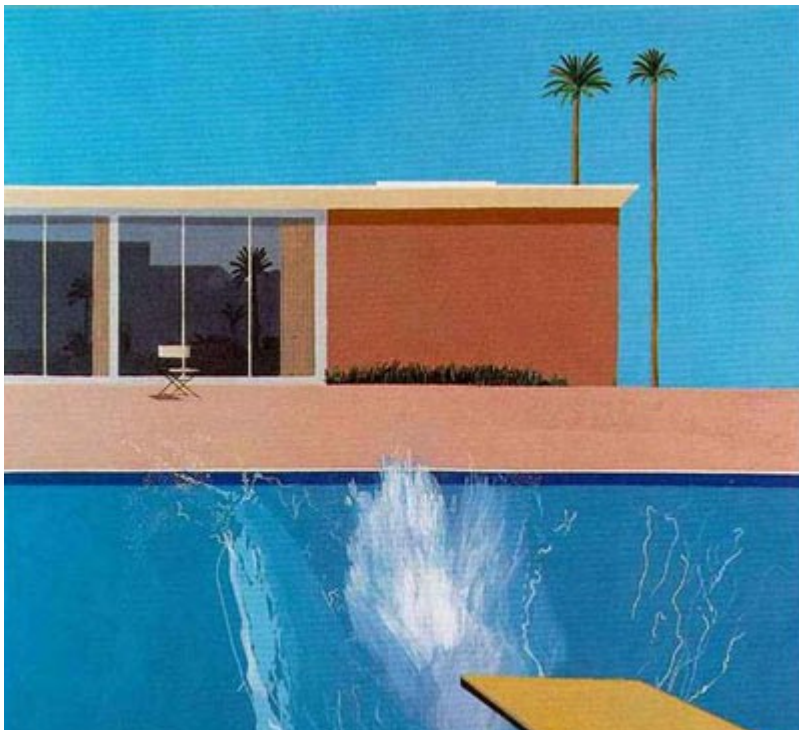
Beyond that, there is no conceivable reason that Vermeer would have needed an image of his unfinished painting in a box. The whole point of the camera obscura, supposing Vermeer had one, was to transfer a three-dimensional image—life!—to two dimensions, so that it was easier to draw. But Vermeer's painting was already in two dimensions, so it would be pointless to aim the camera obscura at it. That is quite literally taking a picture of a picture.

Neither the director nor the actors nor the editors nor the writers nor the producers nor the audience ever understood that. Here they were striking a very public blow for the Hockney-Falco thesis and probably not even realizing they were doing it. Now the worldwide public can say they saw Vermeer using a camera obscura in that famous movie, so it must be true. A popular belief is always more powerful than any truth, despite what we are told.

That is all very bad, but it gets worse. The nearly decade-old debate of the Hockney-Falco thesis has been just as absurd as the thesis itself. The counter-argument has been led by David Stork, a professor of computer science at Stanford. Dr. Stork has given many lectures and published many papers attacking the H-F thesis. He has done some good work, and he happens to be correct, for the most part. But the problem is that the question has never been decided by the correct experts. The debate has been between fake artists, physicists, and computer scientists. So we once again have a tempest in the wrong teapot.

The first mistake in the scientific response to Hockney is the assumption that Hockney's thesis is scientific. It isn't. Hockney's thesis isn't even a thesis, it is just very bald propaganda dressed up as a thesis. In treating it as a scientific thesis, the academic community confers upon Hockney's idea a legitimacy it doesn't merit. You only seriously debate things that may or may not make sense, but in this case there is no "may" involved. These scientists and historians immediately began looking for evidence for and against, but they forgot to ask if the question was mainly evidentiary. They forgot to question why Hockney was proposing the thesis: what the proposal might mean in the current milieu and for the current art administration. They forgot to ask how the proposal might act as a compensatory act for Hockney, as an individual, and as misdirection for modernism. Because these scientists and historians were not active players in the field of art, they didn't allow for the existence of all these variables. Despite the ubiquity of Deconstruction, no one thought to deconstruct Hockney's intentions. What was needed was not a cadre of physicists or historians or computer scientists; what was needed was a team of psychologists.





this is an Ingres painting

this is a Hockney painting

There is a very simple reason this debate did not come up in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and it is because real artists were still in control of art back then. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, artists debated topics that were important to them, and since they didn't debate this topic, we may assume it wasn't important. Why was it not important? It was not important for the same reason that the production of milk is not debated by cows or that the genesis of wood is not debated by trees. That is, *artists already knew the answer*. If you are an artist, you don't need to ask how artists draw. Artists draw with their hands, using their eyes, and that is all there is to it. Yes, *bad* artists may need to use cheating tricks, but there have always been good artists, and the good artists did not have to ask themselves how paintings got painted.

As simple proof of this, go to the illustration from Hockney's book (above), where he uses all these cheating tools and still fails to draw well. This is because Hockney is a bad artist. He can't draw. So of course he is going to wonder how it is done. Short people don't really understand how to slam dunk, and slow people don't really understand how to run fast, in the same way. But if they want a lesson in how it is done, they go to tall and fast people to see it done, directly. They don't go to other short or slow people with bigger mouths, or to physicists or computer scientists or historians or critics.

In any other century this debate would not have been possible. Only at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, when art had been nearly destroyed and the artist nearly wiped out, could this question become a serious question. Art had been taken over by the non-artist, and here he was, Hockney, the rich and famous non-artist, asking publicly how art could be done! He really couldn't understand it. It had to be some kind of trick, right? We have been taught that all art is some kind of pose, so this old art must have been a different sort of pose, a different sort of lie. The Getty Center taught us that talent doesn't exist, so it doesn't, right? It is just smoke and mirrors, like modernism, right?



This was *not* done by Hockney with a projector

To save us from this idiocy, the media did not turn to real artists: nobody knew what bomb shelter to look in. Everyone just supposed that the real artist was extinct and that we were on our own with this one. Bring in the computer scientist and let us run a few years of tests: with enough computer models maybe we can tease out an answer. And so we have seen high-profile symposia, well-attended by the universities, where every technical point is argued *ad infinitum*, from the quality of lenses, the brightness of the light, shadow analysis, and so on.

In this way, the debate was, from the beginning, misdirected into the wrong fields. The wrong questions were asked, so even when they were answered correctly, they did not lead to a resolution. Not only was the tempest in the wrong teapot, it was in a misdefined teapot—a teapot that could not whistle even when it was boiling.

For example, let us look at some of Dr. Stork's postulates. Just to be clear, I say "postulates" on purpose. A postulate is an assumption you have before you enter a debate. It is not one of the points you will debate: it is one of the things that all sides agree upon. The ground rules, if you like. He says,

“Hockney’s claim is first and foremost historical.” This is something that we may assume both the physicist Falco and the computer scientist Stork agree upon.

But no, Hockney’s claim is first and foremost *artistic*. It is a question of ability, not of history. It concerns art history, yes, but it is an artistic claim. As an artistic claim, it can be disproved with no reference to history. Hockney’s claim is not just that artists used optical devices, but that they used them *because they needed to*. If they hadn’t used them, they wouldn’t have been able to draw so well, and their paintings would have looked like Medieval paintings, or Hockney’s paintings. That is not a historical claim, that is an artistic claim, because it must mean that living artists could not draw so well if they did not use optical devices.

Because Hockney’s claim is not a historical claim, it means that even if Hockney proves that Vermeer or Ingres used optical devices, he would not have proved his thesis. In that case, it could be argued against him that the devices were used for the sake of convenience or speed, not need. If it can be proved that artists can draw to any precision they desire, then it does not matter what shortcuts artists in the past may have used: Hockney is still wrong. If artists can draw to any precision they desire, this must mean that the historical advance in naturalism in the early Renaissance was not due to optical devices, but was due to other causes.

Let us look at another postulate of Dr. Stork:

A range of expertise is needed to make and evaluate claims about Hockney's thesis. Someone without firm educational foundation and professional experience in several of these areas is likely to be unreliable.

Dr. Stork then gives us a list of “scholars who have published in scholarly publications.” This list is divided into “scientists/technologists, historians of art or optics, and curators.” Notice anyone missing there? We get a lot of emphasis on scholars and scholarship, don’t we? You may ask yourself, are artists scholars? Could they be considered scholars, under any contemporary scheme, without getting a degree in art history? Could they get published in “scholarly” journals of any type? Say that we brought one of these artists that Hockney is talking about back from the dead: actually transported him into the early 21<sup>st</sup> century. Could he, based solely on his abilities and achievements, qualify himself for publication or qualify himself as an expert? Would Vermeer himself qualify as a scholar?

We also get this postulate:

The most important scientific discipline required is **computer vision, pattern recognition and image analysis**.

Interesting that the most important requirement of Dr. Stork, the computer scientist, is that the expert be a computer scientist. But really, do these postulates contain any logic? Are scientists, historians and curators likely to know the most about this topic? Let me put it another way, are scientists, historians and curators the most likely to know the most about basketball, or are the best basketball players the most likely to know the most about basketball? Basketball players do not have advanced degrees, a “range of professional expertise”, nor have they published in peer-reviewed journals. But if I have a

question about basketball, give me Michael Jordan. Specifically, if I have a question about what basketball players can do, and if I see Michael Jordan do it, then I will know that basketball players can do it. Michael will not have to present to me a week-long symposium and a hatful of treatises. He will do what he does, and say that is how it is done. If Hockney still claims it cannot be done, we will know he is mad.

In closing this section, I want to look at one final claim of Dr. Stork:

I've never said we've "disproved" Hockney's theory—just cast great doubt upon his claims, surely enough to refute his and Falco's claims they've "proven artists as early as 1420 certainly did use optics—of this there simply is no doubt."

Exactly my point here. Because Dr. Stork treats Hockney's claim as a historical one, he cannot finally prove or disprove it. He can only show factual or logical or historical inconsistencies in Hockney's claim, and hope to overwhelm the claim by a preponderance of evidence. But I can disprove Hockney once and for all, since, as I show, his thesis stands or falls on ability. He says something cannot be done, I do it, and the argument is over. Not proof by a preponderance of evidence, but proof by display. Proof by the existence of what is claimed not to exist.

Why is this proof not accepted? It is not accepted because there is no way to publish such a proof in a scientific journal, an art journal, or a mainstream publication. You will say it is quite easy to videotape a thing and have it verified by an independent third party, but you are missing my point. It is not a matter of videotaping the event. It is a matter of getting published. Realist artists cannot get published anywhere saying anything. I know this from experience. They cannot get published in scientific journals because they are not tenured scientists. They cannot get published in mainstream journals because mainstream journals have prejudged all opinion on art in favor of modernism and against realism. They cannot get published in art journals because they are not famous **modern** artists. You will say that if they are not famous, that may reflect on their abilities. But that is to miss a central fact of modern art: *realists are not allowed to be famous*. It is a pre-established fact, a rule, set in stone before you even enter the field. And who makes the rules? People like Hockney, people who don't want to be inconvenienced with talent or skill.

So you begin to see how it is. This question can only be answered by real artists, but *art moderne* disallowed real artists decades ago. Hockney is allowed to propose asinine theories, since he is an insider; but, even though his theory concerns the ability of artists who can draw very well, no artists who can draw very well are allowed to give testimony. And we find the same thing in science. Scientists do not want expert testimony from artists, because if it is admitted that artists are capable of giving expert testimony, scientists are no longer needed to decide this question. For this reason, everyone involved must be very careful to keep artists who can draw out of the debate. Because once we get into the debate, it is over very fast and everyone's little agendas, whatever they are, must immediately end. As you can see, several people have built careers on this question. Hockney extended his faltering career, and several scientists and historians and writers have gotten their names into Wikipedia based on this alone.



Just to prove to you how transparent this all is, I will relate to you an email exchange I had with Dr. Stork. I wrote him after coming from his art site, where he says these things I have quoted above. Nonetheless, I offered him an alliance and pointed out to him a lot of ammunition he was failing to use. But we soon got crossways. It became very clear very fast that he considered himself the Pied Piper, and I was just a rat or a child expected to follow quietly. I finally told him I was going my own way, and would publish my own thoughts on the matter. He replied, "Great. Where do you think you'll publish? (Online won't make a dent, I'm afraid.)" Here was the subtle turn of the blade, the hiss of the snake. He might as well have said, "Poor boy, don't you know that we have all publication roads blocked? If you want a mention in this, you need to follow my lead and do what you're told."

Well, I won't turn the reverse knife so subtly. Dr. Stork, what you fail to understand is that, as the real artist here, I cannot lose. I am the one that produces the real art and the real writing. In two hundred years, my paintings and my words will still be alive. They are alive now, and they will live on. But you produce nothing. Your computer models will be forgotten in ten years, and this whole argument would dry up and blow away, except for my part in it. From any distance, the only artistic content of this debate will be this paper. So all your blocks will come to nothing. You can only block me in the short term, but in the long term the Muses will tend to my interests. If you knew anything about art and art history, you would know this to be true.



This was *not* done by Hockney with a lead pipe, a blowtorch, and a box of tampons

But to get back to Hockney. All these oily parties have managed to spin this ultimately childish



question—a question that should have been decided with one wave of the hand—into almost a decade of research and debate. If an artist like Rodin were still around, he could have dismissed this question with one authoritative shrug, a shrug which meant, “You foolish people will never understand art, so quit trying. Just open your hearts and your eyes, and let the sciomancer work his spell. Apply your rulers and your computer models to electrons and let us be. No amount of analysis will make art richer for you—just the reverse. Could a computer model make sex sexier, or food taste better? No. Just so, art. Some will say, if you want to know about art, ask an artist. But I say, if you want to know about art, look at a great painting or sculpture. That is all there is to know.”

That no one finish this paper thinking my main foe here is Dr. Stork, I will conclude by thumping Hockney a few more times. What most people still have not understood is that Hockney’s “thesis” was never a thesis to start with. It was a faux-thesis, a small and pathetic piece of agitprop posing as a genuine idea. And it became a famous public idea because it was, at bottom, just more propaganda for modernism and against realism. Hockney brought in Dr. Falco to make his propaganda look scientific, but Hockney’s opinion never had the slightest thing to do with condensed matter physics, as I have shown.

The Hockney thesis did not *just happen* to arrive in the year 2000. By the year 2000 we had seen a decade-long rise of realism and a corresponding fall in modernism. Even first-rank critics like Robert Hughes had begun to attack modernism. Some of the old lies had lost their luster with age: the horrible wrinkles began to show through the make-up, and many began to lose their lust for the old whore. What to do? Well, set the presses in motion again, of course. Pump up the volume. If people weren’t buying the old lies anymore, tell new lies at higher decibels. If the old whore was past her prime, hire a new young whore and keep her in fresh lipstick and clear heels. Anything to maintain the prices at auction.

And so, concurrent with Hockney’s book, [we got articles in \*Forbes\*](#) and the [Wall Street Journal](#) and a thousand other places telling us that modernism was still a great investment and that realism was just a haunt of downmarket sluts. [I have written](#) about these articles on this site. [We also got a billion dollar upgrade for the flagship of modernism in the US: MOMA](#). We got a lot of noise and flutter meant to convince us something was still happening, but nothing was really happening except the beginning of a long and inexorable deflation and decline. Yes, Duchamp’s slightly clever joke of 1917 was being told again for the millionth time, by comedians who lacked all sense of timing. Damien Hirst was still trying to find something that hadn’t yet been put in a museum, so that he could put it there and then be found clever. Ditto for Tracey Emin and Rachel Whiteread and the Chapman brothers and a thousand other fakes and phonies.

For Hockney this deflation was more than a historical trend, it was a personal tragedy. He was getting old and his fame was dissolving. If he had been Elizabeth Taylor he would have come out with another perfume, but, being Hockney, he couldn’t do that. No one wants to smell like a modern artist. So Hockney did the next best thing: he wrote a book. And he had a theory. As in the famous Monty Python sketch with the theory of Anne Elk (Miss) on the brontosaurus, Hockney had a theory, that he had, that was his and which belonged to him, which was as follows and begins now: a theory that all artists in

history had the same ineptitude he has. The only difference was, they had discovered tricks he hadn't yet mastered. Yes, they had *machines*.

Just savor that for a moment before we move on. *Artists from 500 years ago were better than us due to machines*. I could chew on that all day.

To spell it out, we have much better machines now, so shouldn't we be able to draw much *better* than the Old Masters? Hockney doesn't need to use camera obscuras or camera lucidas. Someone should tell him that we now have actual cameras, with storable images, and high quality projectors of all kinds. If he wants to cheat, he can cheat with all the fruits of modern technology. Why doesn't he talk about or use this technology in *Secret Knowledge*? Because he had already been using it for decades, and even with it he couldn't draw for sour apples. But he couldn't put that fact out in the open, since it would undercut his "thesis" in a second.



This was *not* done by Hockney with a crowbar, a stack of paper plates, and a set of #30 ball bearings

It's not just Hockney who can't ride any technology, old or new, to better or equal the Old Masters. No one living can do what they did, either freehand or with rooms of technology. Logically, this must mean

that their achievements were not based on technology. Their achievements were based on a number of things that almost no one in this debate ever mentions: social factors, beginning with education and encouragement, but also including a market for good work, the availability of cheap models, the availability of cheap assistants, the availability of affordable studios with high ceilings and the necessary square footage, the availability of good equipment and materials, and the time needed to use all these things. Concerning this last item, contemporary realists who want to make a living must work with galleries, and galleries want a large number of small paintings, delivered quickly. In the contemporary world, time has speeded up greatly. Only a hundred years ago, Sargent could get 85 sittings with a portrait client. These days, you can't get 85 sittings with your own wife, or with yourself. Try to imagine how much model time someone like Rubens or Lebrun or David burned for just one of their large paintings. I don't make enough money in a year to pay the models it would take for *one* of those paintings, paid by the hour. These are the things that make a difference, not cameras or lenses or calipers.

This theory was so infantile in so many ways it will be impossible for future historians to believe it ever made the papers, but Hockney happened to be a member of a sect that thrived on infantilism. Modernism had been accepting artwork based on a purposely upside-down set of criteria for a full century. It wanted and demanded non-artistic art, so that it could deconstruct the entire category. Modernists have been stating this in clear declarative sentences at least since the time of Futurism, around 1909. Clement Greenberg gave us the most influential codification of these criteria in the 1940's. So why should anyone in the universities or journals or institutions of modernism balk at accepting historical theories that were just as absurd as the art and the political justifications for the art? No, the correct modern thing to do is accept them *because* they are absurd, because they are infantile, because they are lacking all sense. Those who incorporated the Hockney-Falco thesis into the universities never asked for proof of the thesis or the least evidence for it. They have never followed these debates because they don't care if the thesis is true. They only care that the thesis is useful to their careers.

Like Anne Elk's theory of the brontosaurus (small on one end, large in the middle, and small again on the other end) Hockney's theory is so devoid of rational content that it is little more than a pasting together of holes. But let us—just so the future may continue to laugh—look for a moment at another of the larger of these holes. We now have a decade of commentary on the theory, but no one has yet commented on the irony of a modern artist proposing that Medieval artists painted the way they did because they couldn't do any better. Doubtless, future historians will, in the same way, judge cubism. They will not realize that cubism was a *choice* of Picasso. They will think that Picasso caught a bug sometime around 1905, destroying his ability to focus his eyes and move his limbs.

You see, Hockney's thesis is just as ridiculous. Hockney *knows* that modernism was a choice. He knows that 20<sup>th</sup> century artists quit drawing well on purpose, for political and theoretical reasons. But he cannot apply the same logic to Medieval artists. It never occurs to him that Medieval icons look like they do because the artists (and the church) *wanted* them to look that way. He cannot ask himself the obvious artistic question, because he cannot think like an artist. The obvious question is this: would a

Medieval icon be more powerful—as a *religious icon*—if it were painted realistically? Of course not. Medieval icons don't look like photographs because the Medieval artists didn't want them to look like photographs. Reality didn't have the requisite mystery for the desired effect, so it wasn't attempted.

An analogous question is this: would Picasso's Blue Period paintings have the same effect if they were painted in correct colors, with correct lines, in a naturalistic manner? Again, No. Picasso didn't paint his Harlequins that way by accident, or because he couldn't achieve a Bouguereau-type realism. He painted them that way with full artistic intent.

Just so, the Medieval painters. Medieval painters weren't influenced by technological considerations, like the availability of lenses and so on. They were influenced by *creative* considerations. They were influenced by church and social doctrine, which naturally impelled them into certain styles.

Remember that the basic question Hockney is trying to answer is "why would the Medieval painters paint that way?" If a lot of people hadn't asked themselves that question, Hockney's thesis would never have gained a foothold. "If human talent is a constant, why would the Medieval painters have chosen to paint that way? Why would anyone who could paint like Raphael choose to paint wooden icons instead?" That is the question that most people cannot answer, and Hockney seems to answer it. The Medieval painters hadn't discovered the proper tools for looking at the world. Their hands and brains were limited by their lack of technology. That is his answer. But the towering irony is that Hockney will not ask the same question of the 20th century. Why would a culture that could produce Leonardo and Michelangelo decide to start exhibiting slashed canvases and ballpens and lotto tickets as art? Because, for some reason, they preferred it, just as Medieval society preferred wooden icons. You have to remember that people are crazy, and entire cultures can go crazy for decades or centuries. We are living through one such time: why should it be hard for us, as a deranged culture, to understand the derangement of the Middle Ages? The answer: deranged people are even less empathetic than normal people. There is no brotherhood of derangement, only a psychotic isolation. This is what I meant by my claim above that what we need here is not a debate of physical evidence, but a thorough psychological analysis. We do not need a shadow analysis of the Old Master paintings, we need a shadow analysis of Hockney's brain, literally.

You would think this would be obvious to anyone who did any amount of freethinking about these matters, but I have met almost no one who has. Just as the Medieval artists were compelled by the church, modern people feel compelled by society to take one of the two given sides in any argument or debate. They cannot strike out on their own and take a third side, even when the third side is clearly better, since they wouldn't have as many friends sitting with them there.

If you take Hockney's side you have all of modernism sitting with you. All the universities will be your friend and all the other institutions, too. If you take Dr. Stork's side you will have a goodly portion of academia on your side and sizable portion of the public. If you take a third side you are on your own. You may have the satisfaction of being correct, the satisfaction of not looking like a complete fool to future artists and other sensible people, but what good will that do you now?—now, when sensible people are outnumbered by whooping cranes.

What both sides of this debate are constitutionally unable to do is to look at the question from any elevation or distance. Both are caught up in banal, quotidian, careerist currents, narrowly defined by their own inabilities and misunderstandings. This is not surprising, since we are all limited by our own abilities and understandings. How could it be otherwise? The difference is, because we are in the arena of art with this "thesis", everyone has lost every last vestige of self-control. Physicists and computer scientists could not unilaterally appoint themselves authorities in basketball—to return to my earlier analogy—because they would immediately be laughed off the court. But unlike sport, art is a field that has been razed. It has been cut down to bare ground: it is a desert. It has been forcibly depopulated. The natural inhabitants of this ecosystem have been wiped out by decades of genocidal policy, and the only critters still around are the subterranean vermin, scurrying through dirty burrows and pits—the fake artists and fake critics and other fake beings of this cratered ghostland.

Because this desert appears to be empty of sentient life, it allows for its temporary resettlement by any passing party, be they a party of physicists or computer scientists or journalists or social workers or critics or historians or theorists of any kind. Anyone with any new religion can set up an outpost here and begin passing out fliers, with no threat of contradiction. Everyone who claims to be an expert *is* an expert, since no one is at hand to say otherwise.

So I can understand that it is a shock to all concerned when I poke my head from the dust and dregs, fully armored and in a blaze of health, and begin lopping off people's arms and legs. They can only find it a bit unfair. They had been told this ground was deedless and ownerless. They did not expect to see so much as a skeleton, much less a fiery sword. They had thought the ancient castle undefended; the gold free to the passing crows and vultures.

Let this writing stand as a signpost then. I am here. The sword of Cellini is not lost. The dagger of Caravaggio is still sharp. Trespass at your peril. This land was bequeathed to me in a long line, in clearest deed and name, and I will not suffer it to be defiled any further. Keep your effluxes and effluents on your own lawn: my desert will be swept clean by the winds, blown by the unsoiled Muses and by the gusts of my ventricose pen. I will nightly drive the maze of tunnels, and when I come upon the creatures crawling there in their own muck and ooze, I will slay them—slay them with as little guilt as St. Michael, slaying the ancient sinners.

For more against Hockney, you may go [here](#).

[Click here](#) to see my first letter to the editors on this subject, from 2000, also published at ARC in 2004.

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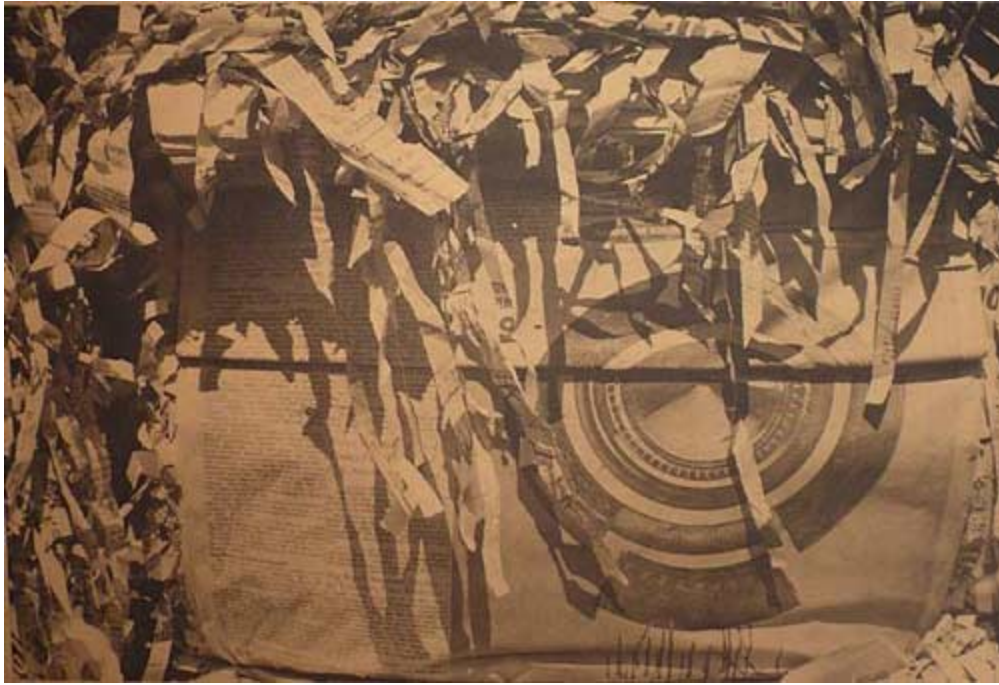
If this paper was useful to you in any way, please consider donating a dollar (or more) to the SAVE THE ARTISTS FOUNDATION. This will allow me to continue writing these "unpublishable" things. Don't be confused by paying Melisa Smith--that is just one of my many *noms de plume*. If you are a

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# DENNIS HOPPER: DOUBLE-FAKE ARTIST

*by Miles Mathis*



**Dennis Hopper, photo of newspaper with shredded newspaper**

Dennis Hopper is having two shows open this week (May 8, 2009) at the [Harwood Museum](#) in Taos, New Mexico. One is a show of his “art.” In the other, he is “curating” a show of some of his friends' “art.” To begin with, let us look at some examples of Hopper's art and his friends' art.



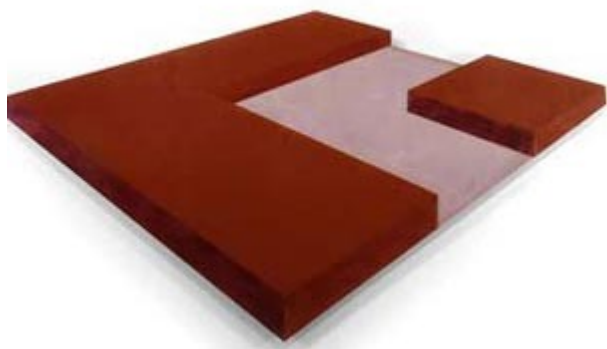
Dennis Hopper, oil on canvas



Larry Bell, "You can't clean snot off suede"



Ron Cooper, *Puro Chingon*     Ronald Davis,



Ronald Davis, *6/9ths red*     Dean Stockwell, *What goes up*, collage



Ken Price, sculptures

I don't even need to critique these works: they speak for themselves. This is art for the creatively impaired. We have all seen better art by elephants and chimpanzees. Gerbils have more imagination than this. Pigeons cooing are more expressive. Porpoises smiling at us from their glassy dungeons have a better sense of humor than Larry Bell with his snot on suede. Even a goldfish in a bowl exudes a clearer understanding of art, since it intuitively glides through the water with beauty and grace, uncued by critics.

This last stab is not gratuitous, since we must remember that Hopper put up one of the greatest cinematic bombs of all time, the notorious *Last Movie*, and he did it by listening to Alejandro Jodorowsky, the king of psychomagic, psychobabble and artbabble. Hopper, like all the other modern



These people cannot exist artistically without an external cue and a fish thrown from the trainer. They must mirror expectations because they have nothing within to go on.

In that famous scene from *Apocalypse Now*, Brando is reading from T. S. Eliot: "We are the hollow men, We are the stuffed men." Remember, he was talking to Hopper: the hollow man, the stuffed man. Hopper was mouthing big words with wild eyes (he does this in real life just as in the film—playing himself as usual—tough acting, that): words like physics and dialectics, and Brando threw the book of poetry at him, yelling, "you mutt!" These days, Hopper does the same character, but he does it in real life, and he does it with art instead of poetry or philosophy. He wears an Armani suit and \$500 sunglasses and a Republican tie pin instead of a red bandana and beads, but he is still the same character, mouthing empty words. He uses words like "art" and "artist" without having any idea what they mean, just to look like an intellectual. Which gives me the chance to play the Brando character. Yes, I get to be Colonel Kurtz. I get to throw the book of art at Hopper and shout, "You Mutt! You know nothing about art! Your art and your idea of art is

Shape without form, shade without colour,  
Paralysed force, gesture without motion

And this applies to the art of your friends and all the art you surround yourself with and all the people you surround yourself with! You are a "headpiece filled with straw." In Taos you are truly the prince of the "dead land, the cactus land." And the people at the Harwood are "gathered on this beach of the tumid river", with their dry voices, not quiet but indeed meaningless,

As wind in dry grass  
Or rats' feet over broken glass

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Yes, clearly Hopper has used his minor Hollywood fame to buy himself and his friends into the field of art. In the past, if someone bought himself into a field, we would call him a fake. But since Hopper has bought himself into contemporary art, which was already a fake field, we can say that he is doubly fake. By presenting nullities as art, Hopper has *acted* like a contemporary artist, and since contemporary art is an act to begin with, nobody can tell the difference between the first act and the second act. Are we removed once from art here, or twice? Do we have commentary, or a commentary upon a commentary? Hard to say. All that we can say for certain is that we once again have nothing sold to us as something.

Well, no, we can also say for certain that getting your friends into the museum is not curating. Curating is normally defined as choosing art based on its merits, not on personal connections, but in the modern world all definitions and customs have been jettisoned. During most of the history of art, using the

museum to have shows for your friends would have been seen as tasteless, if not illegal. Don't most museums have something in their charter forbidding cronyism? Even in this day and age, I think the public would be distressed to find that a museum curator was choosing works for personal reasons, but no one has blinked an eye when the museum brings in an actor to "curate," and he "curates" into the show a bunch of his old buddies. The museum doesn't even try to hide the corruption: it boldly promotes the cronyism as something unremarkable, laudable even.

I made this rather obvious argument to a stranger in a bar, and that stranger (who turned out to be "in the arts") got quite offended. I said, "What the fuck does Dennis Hopper know about art?" She responded, "He knows a lot more than you do. He judged the Turner Prize, he has been in museum shows all over the world, has won many honors, and he owns a huge collection of modern art." I answered, "No, you don't know me. You are getting 'you' and 'me' confused. Hopper may know more about art than you do, but Kermit the Frog (another famous Hollywood person) knows more about art than you do. The Turner Prize is not art, it is anti-art. So being there to hand out the prize has nothing to do with art. Hopper wasn't even a judge, he was just a presenter. To be a judge, you had to be a major intellectual like Neil Tennant of the Pet Shop Boys, who knows almost as much about art as Elmo or Bart Simpson."

As for the rest, receiving awards from dishonorable people is not the same thing as winning honors. We have another imprecision in vocabulary here. Dick Cheney has received lots of awards and even "honorary" degrees. That does not make him honorable. And showing in museums does not make you an artist. One might as well say that killing innocent women and children at the Washita River makes you a soldier or that shooting a charity basket at halftime (and missing) makes you an NBA player.

And if we look at Hopper's collection of art, we find a large stash of works like the ones above. This is not proof that he knows art, it is proof that he knows nothing about art.

Of course all this just made the lady "in the arts" madder, and she finally played her trump card. She said, "Look, art isn't about beauty anymore. That is passé. Dennis Hopper is a progressive and that is why I respect him more than I do you."

First of all, she still didn't know who I was, so this only meant, "I respect him more than I respect someone who doesn't agree with everything I say." But rather than pursue that logic, I pursued this logic: I said, "progressive in what way?"

She said, "Well, he is a modern artist. He believes in democracy. He is not for that old humdrum about aristocratic art for Kings and Popes."

Perfect, since that allowed me to play my trump card. I said, "Really? So that is what modern art is about? If that is the case, then I challenge Hopper to a democratic and artistic duel. Let us both put our art in the same museum, invite the public for free, and let them vote on who is the real artist. Voting is



democratic, wouldn't you say? Next to my work, his would look like mouse droppings.”

At that point she went a bit pale. Even though she didn't know who I was, my confidence frightened her. She hemmed and hawed, and finally said it was a moot point, since it wouldn't ever happen. And I agreed with her. It *won't* ever happen because they know the outcome as well as I do. They can talk the talk of democracy, but they can't walk the walk. They don't want fairness or democracy, they want the museum and all the “cultural” attention for themselves, and they want to exclude anyone that threatens them. They don't want to encourage the public to come to the museum, by displaying real art; they want to discourage the public from coming, by putting up fake art. This assures their continued hegemony as administrators. If you brought back real art, you would also have to hire real administrators—people who knew something about art. As it is, any star-kissing phony can become a museum director or staff worker. Or I should say, *only* the star-kissing phonies can become museum staff, since only the phonies fit into the current order of business.

Since the entrenched philistines will never allow someone like me to show next to Hopper, let us create a little virtual museum.





*Triptych Altarpiece of Harriet Westbrook Shelley*  
(click to go to details)

Dennis Hopper, *After the Fall*

Here we have a fifteen-foot tall triptych, with oil painting, poetry in calligraphy, sculpture, and woodworking, against an 8 x 12" photo-montage. I said Hopper's work would look like mouse droppings, but that turns out to be too generous. Mouse droppings, as contemporary art, would actually be more powerful than Hopper's attempts at contemporary art. Since contemporary art is anti-art, what he should have been looking for is something like Duchamp's urinal. That urinal was pretty potent at the time (1917), as a sample of non-art or anti-art. Hopper's pathetic little photo montages don't really get off the starting blocks as either art *or* anti-art. But if he trucked in a 50,000 gallon plexiglas container from the state aquarium and filled it with fresh mouse droppings, complete with a fan to blow the fumes out into the halls of the Harwood, he might be able to create a great enough ruckus to keep the visitors from looking at my Triptych. That would be his only hope in such a contest.

And that brings us to the final question: How many more decades must we continue to be assaulted with this stuff? We have the power and the numbers to take back the museums from these faux-people: why have we not done it already? Why have almost all the museums in the US and the world been left to this corrupted cabal of conmen and conwomen? This is not historical necessity, this is not "just the

way things are." This has happened because those who love art have let it happen. Our village has been invaded and we have not even tried to drive off the invaders. We give them our houses and cattle and wives and children and go live in the swamp. Whose fault is that?

The town museum is the ancestral home of real artists, not of these posers. The town museum is the public possession of the townspeople, and they should feel at home there. They should see art there, not anti-art, non-art, or fake art.

The Harwood in Taos started out long ago as a private museum, but it is now part of the University of New Mexico and is funded in large part by tax dollars. In 2008 it received 1.22 million dollars of public money for expansion. Therefore it is a public institution. It is not the playground of any elite—of aging actors or rich society ladies or self-appointed critics. It is the town museum. A large majority of townspeople, in Taos and every other town, are not interested in the art above, and it is not because they are critically uneducated. It is because they are honest. They cannot be bothered to see a show of snot on suede, much less pay to see it, because it is not interesting in any way. No matter what you title it, art or non-art or anti-art, it is still boring. It is uninteresting artifacts by untalented people, as any child or precocious parrot can see.

The solution is very simple, since all it requires is the citizens taking the museum back. It requires talking and doing. It requires telling these people to be off. It requires firing the museum phonies and not inviting the fake-artists. It requires letter writing and sit-ins and protest, like anything else. It requires petitions and lawsuits. As citizens, we do these things for other causes. Why have we let art die without the least protest? There are still things to put in these museums that people would be interested to see, as I have shown, and if the museums were taken back, more real artists would emerge and more real artifacts would be created. But I can't do it all myself. I can invite the townspeople of the world, I can exhort them, but I cannot force them to show up. I hear a lot about art lovers, but I see very little to prove it. Where are you? Speak up! We need to hear your "YOP!"







## The Horsehead Fountain, Bruges



*pastel*  
*20 x 14 in. sight*

[return to 2004](#)

## A Defense of Human Beauty

*by Miles Mathis*



A ghost arising from the past—from the period of Ancient Greece to the period of the Edwardians say—would look upon the title of this paper with curiosity or confusion. He might ask his airy self, “How does human beauty require a defense?” One might as well write or read a defense of chocolate ice cream. But a modern reader will not be confused for a moment. He or she will more likely wonder that I have the audacity to bring the subject up at all, since I am an artist and, beyond that, have made some claim to intelligence. Surely I know the left’s position; surely I don’t want to be seen to be on the right; surely I know that those two are the only choices?

Fortunately I have already crossed and burned all bridges and am now striding ahead into the treeless and waterless regions, the blasted plains beyond all possible caring. Out here I can speak sense to the cypresses and the myrtles and they will not be offended. The living are weeping saltily in the cities; out here the only human listeners are ghosts of the past, ghosts who remember fondly the chocolate ice creams.

I arrived at this paper in the usual way. Someone asked me a question many years ago, a question so utterly absurd and shocking to my system that I was forced to file it away until I reached the outer regions. Now that I am here I can unwrap it without fear or disgust, as a sort of game. This was the question, though it will seem unremarkable at first: “Don’t you ever paint ‘everyday people’?” Pause, pause, pause. What could I say to that, in a city situation? How to respond to an “everyday person.” I never painted what I paint to be unfriendly. I never talked to people, “everyday” or not, to be unfriendly. Like Nietzsche, I saved my agonies for a distant unwrapping.

But now that I am safely in the desert, under a vast arm of heaven, I may tell you. No, my dear, I didn’t ever paint everyday people and never shall. If I wanted to interact in fastastical situations with everyday people, I simply woke up and walked out the front door. If I wanted to collect everyday images, I set my one-step camera on stun and began snapping indiscriminately. Once home, I could relive the non-glory of that everyday on every otherday, watching myself and others do nothing important forevermore. I could then have my giant cache of digital banality, to soothe my normal soul into a banal and hopefully dreamless sleep.

It seems to me, at times, though, that the everyday people may not be as consistently boring as they pretend. They want to take offense at beauty and distinction in visual art, since this gives them some social clout, but in other respects they do not drift so cowishly into quiet pastures. Do they watch everyday movies, read everyday books, play everyday vidgames, read everyday magazines with everyday articles? It would seem not. I can’t remember a movie or book or TV show that was about going to the grocery store, getting the correct change, going to work, talking on the phone about reordering computer paper, coming home, having a TV dinner, and then going out and not meeting anybody. Even *Seinfeld*, which was supposed to be about nothing, was gloriously full of interesting things happening. People being funny, for one thing, which almost never happens with everyday people. Meeting pretty people, crazy people, people with personalities, unpredictable people. This almost never happens to everyday people, which is why they watch it so avidly on TV.

But painting is one of those things, like the comics page, that is now *supposed* to be boring. It is required to be, by some statute. It is as if it has been cordoned off for the exclusive use of those who cannot bear excitement or emotion. For the longest time, painting was the exclusive domain of that most arid of subjects, politics. Art became a century-long sermon on morals, and nearly the entire world dozed off. Even this was too rich a fare for some, who took refuge in theory. Here the art could be dispensed with altogether—it was just a wispy suggestion, a quiet finger pointing at a nearly formless idea. One eidolon announcing another. This was as close to death as one could get without hiring a hearse. Nietzsche’s preachers of death, the priests, the spiders, had founded a new career on a new rock. Art was the newest vampire, the newest tomb song. From here all health could be attacked. An attraction to beauty was just one sign of this health.

But at last the congregation began to awaken, hungry for some refreshment. And the new priests discussed how this hunger might be satisfied without feeding it. “We will allow them figures,” said the

tarantulas, “Aye even nudes. We will allow them subjects, if they will have them. But we will not suffer them to enjoy these subjects. *That* can never be allowed to happen in a field that we control!”

And so Lucian Freud and Philip Pearlstein and John Currin and Eric Fischl and Jenny Saville and Odd Nerdrum arrived to entertain the congregation. And they did showeth them nudes. And the congregation were at first amazed, for were these not the very subjects that were taboo but last Sunday? And the people took the nudes greedily, for they were ahungered and athrist and their mouths were parched and their bellies empty.

But the nudes satisfyeth them not, for the nudes had been carefully embalmed and drained of all passion and emotion and pleasure. They were either sickly or rotting, as with Saville and Freud, or they were deranged and spoke of death, like Nerdrum or Currin, or they were clinical and cold, like Pearlstein, or they were unspeakably banal, a blown-up Mary Worth, updated with fake frisson, like Fischl.

And so verily the people left the frigid church and went online, where other people were doing unspeakable outrages upon one another’s bodies; and the voyeurs only desired to join them, unspeakable or no. For these people online were not everyday people. They were young and beautiful and (momentarily) healthy looking. They were having a party. All desired to join this party, for this is where the pleasure was allowed.

And so the world was divided, not into left and right, but into happy unhealthy sinners who would likely crash and burn very soon and unhappy healthy moralists who would likely do nothing, ever.

And art was an accomplice in this false division, for it lied to the people when it said that art could or should not include pleasure. It lied when it said that art in the past had not provided pleasure. It lied when it said that it was for the people’s own good that pleasure was denied. It lied when it told them that Freud was outdated, for Freud had warned, just like Nietzsche, against the priests and spiders. He had spelled out how pleasure and health would be turned on their heads, made to dance by the new priests, made to dance the tarantella.

But the people chose to believe their captors, and were groomed for ever smaller cells. The cell might shrink to the size of a TV screen, but no smaller, for the body was infinitely bendable, but technology inexorable.

Some will think I am making the case for art as licit porn, but these readers are confused by any but the most prosaic sentences. More directly: If people are allowed pleasure from natural sources then they will not be forced to seek it through dirty backchannels. These natural sources used to include human contact and art. Human contact has been curtailed and restricted, while art has been redefined. This has forced the libido and all pleasure seeking into ever lower regions. The Greeks could visit the sublime and still be titillated. The gods themselves were lusty and were possible sexual partners for all. In the Renaissance, the same Adam could enlighten and arouse the same cardinal from the same ceiling of the same chapel. There was no separation of pleasure and knowledge, despite the apple and

the tree and the snake. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the beautiful nudes were everywhere, almost all tied to old morality tales of one sort or another. Almost none were explicit invitations to wickedness or vulgarity or dementia, though they often included it.

In all these times, human beauty was both a call to enlightenment and one of its outcomes. Now, this role has been taken over by Hollywood. The enlightenment there is usually on a lower level, when it exists at all, since the themes of Hollywood are most often political. But the calling card is still human beauty. The beautiful stars get you into the theater, where you can be preached to by directors and screenwriters. A movie or a TV show without beautiful people in it is rare, and the movie that succeeds without them is rarer still. It must make up for it with other types of non-everyday situations and people. Very funny people, very clever people or very violent people, usually. A movie without beautiful people, violent people or funny people is like a slow car without a radio. Painful to the modern psyche.

Nerdrum and his followers would appear to think that he is a sensualist, a provider of licit pleasure in the old ways. But I would ask you to consider this: why does Nerdrum not paint people actually having sex? He has crossed every other line. He has people defecating, people with erections, people murdering each other in cold blood for no reason, deformed people and so on. Why not a couple of hooded freaks shagging on the battle plain? Because that would be too pleasant. It could not be read as simply transgressive or disgusting. Sex is a nice thing, even between mutants of the future or dogs or worms. It cannot be totally sullied. But realism is allowed now by the avant garde, the status quo, only if it is completely upside down. Everything must be undercut or toppled. Everything must bespeak of disgust or agony or victimhood or crushing banality. The sexual act cannot easily be fit into this litany. Only a violent rape could meet the requirements, and this is what we sometimes find in avant garde realism. I predict it may be one of the subjects of Nerdrum in the future.

It will certainly hit the big time before a couple of attractive people having a pleasant shag. This last subject has been common in all the ages of man. Why nothing now? Why, in this time of ultimate freedom and transgression, do we find no pleasant copulation? It would seem to be the perfect historical opportunity for the subject to finally hit the mainstream, in some market or another. You will say that it is unnecessary with the proliferation of online photos and movies. But there are two arguments against that. One is that there is almost no pleasant copulation online. Energetic, yes, imaginative, yes, varied, yes. Loving and tender, no. The second argument against it is that painting has never competed directly with photography. A glut in one area should not affect the other negatively. In fact it should feed it. If there is an audience for one, there should be an audience for the other. And yet we don't see it, not at the most progressive galleries, not at the most conservative galleries, not in the US, not in Europe. A few exceptions exist, of course, but these mostly support my point here. Erotica is not a part of either traditional realism nor of the avant garde. It is marginalized by both, and is probably more out of fashion now than it has ever been.

I am not preparing the way for my entry into the field, but I find it interesting to see how far the avant garde is from embracing erotica. Fischl may be flirting with the idea, but he is still a long way from it, I think. What I said about Nerdrum applies equally to Fischl. Fischl knows his market too well to completely write off its requirements. He must remain jaded and ironic, and the act itself just can't be painted in that way. Couples doing strange things in bedrooms, yes. Having fights, sitting on each other, sprawling upside down or legs akimbo. Couples actually having a good time, no. You can be sure that if someone in the avant garde begins painting people having sex, it will be as a statement about predatory pornography or victimhood or some other agony. There will be no pleasure involved in looking at it.

For several decades now, physical human beauty has been seen by the intelligentsia to be a categorical signal of either shallowness or oppression, or both. All female nudity is linked to the Hugh Hefner mentality, and the theorists imply not so subtly that all males are morons (at least when it comes to sex) and that all beautiful females are morons. That this implication is untrue, and just as offensive to women as to men, is rarely seen. If beauty is only skin deep—which is what this whole hypothesis rests on—then logically there must be many beautiful women who are not stupid. That is to say, if there is no connection between looks and quality (which is what the feminists are so keen to drive home) then a good looking woman would be just as likely to be smart as anyone else. And if this is the case, then the feminists should be offended only by paintings of women looking stupid or foolish. They should be offended by paintings by men depicting women looking like vapid tarts, only willing to please. Conversely, a painting by a man of an intelligent woman, one looking deeply loved, or even just looking desired, should not provoke any political outrage, no matter whether she is pretty or not. For what is wrong with desire?

For that matter, what is wrong with a stupid man painting a stupid woman with desire, as long as she has some dignity? Is everyone required to be an intellectual? Artistically, we may find depth or intelligence more interesting than ignorance or shallowness, but politically there can be nothing unfair in relatively ignorant people loving each other, and expressing it. There is nothing at all sexist in a man wanting to paint his wife, or vice versa, no matter their IQs or levels of physical beauty.

“Ah, but you don't paint women regardless of their IQ's or levels of physical beauty,” the feminists will say. “You paint these odd skinny young things who may or may not be intelligent, we don't know. They do have a certain aura: they don't look vapid, we have to admit. They certainly look desired, possibly loved (again we don't know). Most have a *gravitas*, maybe, if you want to put it that way. They appear to be real women with real personalities—personalities that you have not manufactured or suppressed. But they are certainly beautiful, they are thin, and (you claim) they are intelligent. So you are judging women on their looks. If you were not, then you would have an equal number of fat women and unattractive women. You cannot wriggle out of that one.”

But there is no need for me to wriggle anywhere. To avoid being sexist I do not have to be attracted to all women or paint all women. I only have to treat the women I am attracted to as equals,



as human beings with full dignity and rights. And I have to treat the women I am not attracted to as human beings with full dignity and rights. But I do not have to be attracted to them. Neither art nor life is an equal-time situation. It would be just as feckless for me demand that women who are not attracted to me should be attracted to me by some manufactured doctrine of fairness. I am too thin for some women, too hairless for some women, too blond for others, too quiet for others, too curly for others. Too outspoken for most. I accept this. I *must* accept this. I have no choice. Just as they must accept their state of affairs, no matter what it is. They must accept it because no amount of complaint or legislation is going to make me attracted to women I am not attracted to, or make them attracted to me if they are not.

The state of affairs now is precisely equivalent to skinny 19<sup>th</sup> century women petitioning or ostracizing or ignoring with malice the late nudes of Renoir. “All he wants are fleshy women with melons for breasts. Why can’t men like flat-chested women? We demand equal time!” Did many women do this? I don’t think so. Would we be impressed if they had? Not really. It would look more than a bit desperate and absurd, not to say transparently personal. Why should Renoir be forced to paint what he does not like, or not to paint at all?

If only history could be stirred up a bit: Renoir could flatter the women I ignore and I could paint the flat-chested sign-wavers of his time, making them feel artistically loved and important. As it is, the glass seems to be perpetually half-empty. We only hear from the neglected. Those ignored by Botero do not come show-off for me, nor do those ignored by me go undress for Botero, though it would be more empowering (and fun) for everyone involved if they did. No, they prefer to stomp their feet and gnash their teeth and claim that none of us are real artists anyway.

*Of course* I care what people look like, and the people in my paintings most of all. What person, male or female, does not care what people look like, their beloved first and foremost? I care what everything looks like: my shoes, my bicycle, my bedspread, my garden, my house, my town, my dog and my neighbor’s dog. All have some sort of meaning to me. How could my lover’s beauty not interest me? Of course my lover’s looks are not the only thing that interest me about her. What she says, what she does, how she thinks, what she knows, what her voice sounds like, how she moves, how she smells. All of these things are important, and should be. But how could I pretend that the way the world looked was not important to me, and, moreover, why would I want to?

The fallout from this sort of illogical feminism is that I should quit noticing women’s bodies, and that I should do so from a desire for fairness. I should start thinking about other things, start painting other things. Overlooked women don’t like being overlooked, and this is the only solution to that problem. You can’t force men to look equally at everyone, so the fallback position is to force men to ignore everyone equally, or pretend to. What this solves, I can’t imagine. If men ever succeeded in ignoring women’s bodies, the outcry from the female sex as a whole would be deafening. Not only would all get their feelings hurt, instead of just a few; we would also probably stop having babies. Human history would quite simply end.

None of this means anything to the status quo, I know. My comments are just more cries from the past, more excuses for chauvinism. Any man who does not immediately do what he is told is a backslider, part of the “backlash.” Even my Mom, who is beautiful and intelligent and has read her Freud, does not understand why I must be attracted to beauty. If she cannot see my ontogeny as charming in any way, how can other women?

You can see that I have not written just another ode “in praise of fine wine and women.” The modern man is not allowed to be Horace or Catullus. He is not allowed his pleasures, guilty or otherwise. Unless he runs in the lowest circles, he must be on the 24- hour defensive. The upper levels of society are heavily policed by women and their priestly accomplices. We are not even allowed to love them without having our love daily bonzaied by their sharp shears of disapproval.

But these shears will never cut away beauty without taking desire with it. The sisters are cutting eachother’s noses off to spite us, but a clever artist will always be able to find a lovely profile, a rare gem unschooled in political hatred and anti-pleasure.

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# Words of the Day: “Offend” and “Intend”

by Miles Mathis



Paul Soderberg recently published an article with ARC entitled *Storm Warning to the Artworld*. The article's main point was that Modernism was a sham and that ARC and *Plein Air* magazine were two prehistoric superfish that were going to swallow the whale Modernism down whole.

Maybe. As I have said before, I think the intentions and contentions of ARC are mainly correct concerning Modernism, and I would say the same about *Plein Air*. In addition, Mr. Soderberg's article was well-written and clear. He seems to be a logical new voice for ARC, since he is well-read,

outspoken, and confident. I hope he is correct in his assertion that the end of Modernism is near, whether that end is brought about by the two superfish or by other means.

However, it also occurred to me that many will think that Mr. Soderberg's thesis is a smooth transition from mine, or is mostly equivalent. To deflect this possibility I have felt it necessary to write this counterpoint. There are a couple of ideas in Mr. Soderberg's article that I find to be dangerously wrongheaded, though perhaps not intentionally deceptive. Which is to say that I do not know Mr. Soderberg's intentions or the intentions of Eric Rhoads, publisher of *Plein Air*. I know them only by what they say at this point. I therefore assume that they have taken all the various positions they have taken with goodwill toward art, true artists, and art history.

I know the people at ARC a bit better, so I know that this is not true in their case. Mixed in with a love for true art is a desire for power over artists. This should not surprise me, since Nietzsche, a man I quote often, taught that all action is informed by a desire for power. I should be more surprised if Fred Ross' actions or anyone else's *were* wholly determined by goodwill or altruism. Nietzsche would say that my assumption that Mr. Soderberg and Mr. Rhoads are driven mainly by goodwill is naïve, and that I would do better to assume the opposite. That is not the way I work, though. Some have claimed that I burn bridges indiscriminately. I don't. It will take a bit more convincing before I am sure that Mr. Soderberg's philosophy (or that of Mr. Rhoads) is deadly to me. For now I will act on the assumption that it is not fully stated or not fully thought out.

Nor do I respond only to differentiate myself from my successor at ARC. Even had I never written for ARC, it would be important to counter some of the claims of Mr. Soderberg publicly. If realism *is* soon to take over the art world then it must do so not only with the right paintings but with the right ideas. If we build a new faulty definition of art, then we will have doomed the world to another century of bad art and bad thinking.

Mr. Soderberg's first error is on concentrating on the Modern artist in his attack on Modernism. He points at "expression" as being a central villain, and then goes on to complain of the excessive status of the artist in modern society. His fire is slightly misaimed in both instances. First of all, Modern art has not been mainly an art of expression. It has been an art of politics and theory. Expression was an important term in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. But by 1913, the date he cites as the turning point, expression had been replaced by politics and theory. Or, to be even more precise, it was very soon to be. I myself often cite 1917, the year of Duchamp's urinal, as the final turning point. In 2004 this work was voted the most influential work in the 20<sup>th</sup> century by 500 top art experts. I happen to agree with them. It is not the *best* work of the 20<sup>th</sup> century; in fact it is in a first-place tie with about a thousand others for *worst*. But I think it *is* the most influential. Regardless, it is easy to see that there is no artistic expression in this piece. Only if you include political or theoretical expression as part of the definition can you absorb Duchamp's urinal. But you have to remember that until then, historically, expression meant *artistic* expression. For example, the Expressionists, as an historical movement, were not mainly interested in politics or theory. They were expressionists because they were expressing

personal emotions or things along that line. This is also true about the post-Impressionists, the tonalists, the symbolists, and even the Fauves, for the most part. That is what expression had meant in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, and it is what most people mean when they speak of expression in art today. Of course, by this definition, expression is very hard to argue against in art. If you have a problem with Van Gogh's melancholy or Munch's angst, then you also have to jettison Bouguereau's nostalgia and Sargent's languor and Rembrandt's somberness and Chardin's quietude and so on. Expression can hardly be a categorical error in art.

Even with someone like Pollock, it is not the expression that is the problem. Most realists do not dislike Pollock because he was expressive. They dislike him because they doubt that the paintings actually express anything—or anything beyond manic energy. Rothko, likewise. Few dislike him for trying to express himself, I think. He is disliked because it is doubted that he did so effectively. Or, it is thought that the things he expressed are not terribly interesting.

The problem with Modernism was never expression, it was lack of expression. Modernism, at its most influential, was always soulless and emotionless, from Duchamp's found items to John's numbers and targets to Warhol's silkscreens to Pearlstein's and Currin's nudes. Where Modernism was expressing anything, it was not personal emotions but cultural emotions—the artist was borrowing a stance he had learned in some course or from some journal. There are exceptions of course, but the main line of Modernism has been anti-expressive.

Mr. Soderberg's other implication in the first part of the article—that the personal cult of the artist is a central problem of Modernism—is also off the mark. It is true that many artists get paid way too much for way too little and that many many artists are famous for absolutely nothing. But the fact is that, with hindsight and as an overview, artists had less power in their own field in the 20<sup>th</sup> century than at any time in history. Some were able to buy a degree of prestige and a fat paycheck by kissing up to the right people, but they were never the primary players in art. John Currin is at the mercy of Gagosian and the museum curators and the critics and hundreds of other non-artists and he knows it. He could diss Andrea Rosen only because a more powerful gallery was ready to take him. He is a player, and you will never see him playing a tune that does not make him more famous. Or, if he does so, you can expect to see an immediate and precipitous fall. Let him decide to paint subjects like we do, without an obvious political or theoretical spin, and you will see how much his name is worth.

Mr. Soderberg says that in the 20<sup>th</sup> century “the artist became all-important.” But this is absolutely false. The artist is now a brand name, completely interchangeable. What is primary is the theory. Modernism is a very slowly evolving socio-political theory, and it is this theory that is the foundation of all new work. The secondary level is the museum/curator/critic. The curators and critics and other administrators of art, informed by the theory, choose various artists to embody this theory. They guide them and lecture them. The artists are therefore at the third level. They are not “all-important.” They are doubly subordinate. Once the artists have been read the code and given the tests, *then* they will have earned the right to be obnoxious and say ridiculous things. This is their PR function, you see. They are the rich, third level flunkies, doing primarily what they are told. The

poster people. They generate attention, and the method of generating attention is not so important as long as it is non-hierarchical. That is to say, they can be seen pissing in fireplaces and gambling and chasing hookers, but they should not be seen playing polo or watching *Pride and Prejudice* or wearing monocles or getting manicures.

You now see why it has been important for me to make this distinction. Someone who read Mr. Soderberg's article might be prepared to further lower the prestige and power granted to the artist as punishment for a century of abuse or as a blueprint for future humility. This could only make it easier for administrators to rake even more power onto their side of the table. As the "big fish" at ARC and *Plein Air* take over the administration of art from the Moderns, they will then have a huge stack of chips to bet with, and we artists will be sitting there wondering what just happened to the kitty. The public will be told that the balance of power has just shifted from the artists' side to its side. But what will really be happening is that the artists will be too humble to ask for power or to wield it; the public will be too ignorant and too disorganized to move quickly; and the administrators, whoever they are, will emerge as virtual dictators. Forgive me if I do not see this as a pleasant future, even if I am allowed to paint figures.

Mr. Soderberg fails to consider how positive periods in art like the Renaissance might fit into his theory. The answer is, they don't. Anyone who reads Vasari can see that the artists were very powerful players. Michelangelo was considered to be a demigod. All the guilds and workshops were run by masters, and these masters determined the field of art. It was completely hierarchical. The patrons had power as well, the power to hire artists and to commission works. But these patrons, even when they were Popes, had less power than contemporary administrators. Michelangelo fought with various Popes and cardinals and often won. Who could fight with the new Pope—Contemporary Theory—and win? No one. Not even Lucian Freud. Even though he is a realist and a figure painter, Freud is sitting right on the bullseye of Theory. This is not a coincidence.

This is why I doubt the ability of ARC or *Plein Air* to swallow the whole Modernism whole. They do not understand it. They do not see how pervasive it is. Nor do they see how it is tied into many modern ideas that they themselves accept. They want to pull a tooth, but they don't see that the roots of the tooth have gone into the brain and encircled it, and that this brain is their own. In attacking Modernism, they end up attacking expression and the right of the artist to have power in his own field. Pull the tooth with these pliers and art dies. Or to put it in more lucid terms, pull the tooth this way and the zombie of Modernism is replaced by another zombie

Another terrible mistake is made in making "offense" one of the central terms of the argument about art. Mr. Soderberg fails to make some very important distinctions, and without these distinctions his theory of offense will do more harm than good.

He is right to argue that "artists" like Andres Serrano, whose work is summed up by intentional offense, are mostly gratuitous. Even as a political or religious statement, Serrano's work is just shallow



and inflammatory. But Mr. Soderberg does not stop there. He says, “The rest of us hope and strive always to avoid offending people.” Us being real artists. But I don’t think this is true at all. I do not hope and strive always to avoid offending people. I do not *try* to offend anyone or *intend* to offend anyone, but that is a very different thing. Once again it is informative to tie Mr. Soderberg’s statement to the Renaissance, a time full of real artists, by all agreement. Does anyone think that Michelangelo strived to avoid offending people? No. He did what he had to do artistically. In fact, he offended a lot of people, including the church he had been hired by. He did not offend them intentionally. It just turned out that way. He thought it necessary to have nudity. The cardinals disagreed, and were offended. What to do? Who knew more about art, Michelangelo or the cardinals? Most people would say Michelangelo, and history has agreed. The fig leaves are now looked upon as ridiculous by almost everyone, even those within the Catholic church.

I still deal with matters like this on a daily basis, which is why I was able to spot the contradiction in Mr. Soderberg’s argument so quickly. Many people, including my own grandmother, are offended by my nudes, especially the pubic hair. According to Mr. Soderberg’s argument, I should simply quit painting them out of respect for my audience. If I keep painting them, it is a sign of my ties to Modernism, and a sign of my disrespect for the public. I should be uplifting at all times, and by this Mr. Soderberg does not mean genitally uplifting.

You can see that it would be very easy to push his argument one more tiny step past me, where you have Bouguereau’s nudes, chaste and hairless. Many people are offended by Bouguereau. Some are offended by any nudity, no matter how de-sexed. Some are offended by all the little girls looking so scrumptious. Some are offended by the objectification of women, no matter how it is achieved. Should Bouguereau have been required to take all these offended people seriously? Should ARC? Should I? If I say that they can be ignored as prudes or ignoramuses, am I being elitist and hierarchical, dismissive of my public and claiming special treatment? Well, yes. In a way I am. Is there anything wrong with doing it? I don’t think so. I have every right to dismiss prudes and ignoramuses as prudes and ignoramuses.

The problem with the avant garde phonies is not that they are dismissive of ignoramuses, it is that they are themselves ignoramuses. That is to say, it is not the attitude that is the problem, it is the facts of the matter. Michelangelo had every right to dismiss ignorant cardinals or presumptuous citizens of Rome *because he was Michelangelo*. He was a great artist and they were not. He had earned the right to a bit of attitude. The same could be said of Rubens or Rodin or Wyeth. If Wyeth tells a clueless old lady who objects to his Helga series to take a hike, it is unlikely that Mr. Soderberg would take him to task for it.

But the contemporary artists that Mr. Soderberg and I both detest have not earned the right to any attitude. They have staked claim to an ancient hierarchy without doing anything to earn it. It is all a façade propped up only by outlandish presumption. Mr. Soderberg could easily attack Serrano and Finley and all the rest for being fakes. Instead he attacks them for a lack of humility. They are fantastically immodest, but this is not the baseline problem of the situation. The problem is that they are shallow, uninteresting, obnoxious people who have nothing to add to any dialogue or catalogue.

If Michelangelo had been humble and concerned mainly with avoiding offense, he wouldn't have done anything he did. This is true of everyone who ever did anything important, including the princes of peace like Jesus, the Buddha, Gandhi, Martin Luther King, and all the rest. Did Jesus avoid giving offense? Hardly.

Artists should neither avoid giving offense nor intend to give offense. They should intend only to create great art. No great artist was primarily concerned about what his audience thought. An artist who wanted sales had to be concerned to some degree. He could not be unaware of his market (a market that used to consist of one rich person at a time). But an artist whose work is completely determined by concern for his market is not a great artist and never has been. This is universally understood. He is called a market whore and his work is thrown in the kitsch barrel.

Mr. Soderberg seems to be encouraging us all to be like Kinkaid or Pino, slaves to our market or public. I don't honestly think he intends to encourage this, but that is where his comments lead. An artist who only served the public would be completely useless. He would not even strictly be an artist. He would be a decorator. Art may be decorative, but the artist must transcend just filling orders. If there is nothing personal of the artist in the art, then it is not art—or it is very mediocre art. And, you see, we are back to the importance of expression. Not expression as the totality of art, but expression as a necessary ingredient of art.

One final paragraph before I conclude. There is a lot of talk of “intention” in this counterpoint. It has also been a feature of my conversations this week. A fellow realist tried to defend some parts of Modernism by saying that you had to consider the intention of the work. I disagreed, so I must make some distinction between cases where intention is important and intention is unimportant. In short, bad intentions can destroy a good work, but good intentions cannot save a bad work. Let me give some examples. I will start with Mr. Soderberg's example, Serrano's *Piss Christ*. This is a bad work with a bad intention. It is a trifling artifact, and its intention was to offend. Supporters of Serrano claim that its intention was to make people think, but even if so, it failed. It did not make Christians think, it only made them mad. It also did not make agnostics or atheists think, since if they had given up on Christ or the church, they had already thought about things much more deeply than Serrano's work could possibly go. Non-Christians simply would not care one way or the other. For myself, I don't think Serrano's main intention was offense or shock or enlightenment. Serrano's main intention was making Serrano famous. Shock art had been the road to quick fame for years, and it drew people like Serrano like flies. Making people mad without making them think is a sure road to fame. If Serrano had really thought that *Piss Christ* would make people think, he would have chosen something else to portray. Making people think is not lucrative. Look at what we pay teachers.

As an example of good work with bad intentions, the easiest example is Nazi art. Leni Riefenstahl was a very talented photographer and film maker whose art has been dismissed because its intention is assumed to have been to support the Nazi party, if not to support all that the Nazis stood

for. Ms. Riefenstahl claimed that she did not support genocide or any of the rest, but it has been hard for her to deny that her work supported the party.

Finally, we come to bad art and good intentions. I had been talking to my friend about Jean Arp and the work *Chance Collage*, which I critiqued in my MoMA article. My friend defended the work, since its intention may have been to break down barriers or to make people think about the definition of art or various other things. In my opinion, this argument fails for two reasons. One, the work is so trifling on the face of it that no amount of intention or explanation can save it. I could draw a circle on the wall with a ballpoint pen and say that my intention was to save the universe from final and utter destruction from a brood of evil demons, but it is still a circle on the wall drawn in ballpoint pen. A rational person will ask how my circle can possibly save the universe from utter destruction, and I can ask how *Chance Collage* can make an intelligent person think thoughts they had not already thought. Or, given that these thoughts were somehow novel at the time, I can ask if they were not just as trivial as the piece itself. “Is anything inside a frame art?” asked Arp. Wow, deep. Two, my evil demons example makes it clear that stated intentions are unprovable. We judged Riefenstahl’s intentions not on what she said, but on what must be the case by all the facts at hand. Likewise, Serrano’s intentions are finally unknowable. I dismissed him whether his intentions were what his supporters said they were or what his enemies said they were. He could not win either way.

Serrano could be lying, Arp could be lying, and of course I was probably lying when I said I was trying to save the universe from ultimate destruction. That or crazy. Either way it would be OK to dismiss my stated intentions, since they were so clearly out of synch with the actual work. If Kinkaid stated that his intention was to create masterpieces, we would either dismiss it as a lie or dismiss it as a colossal failure. When the work is crap, intentions don’t mean a thing.

Some will wonder if none of this was really meant to offend. I said that I never intended to offend, and yet how could Mr. Kinkaid not take offense? And we have reached yet another distinction. I said that my *art* was not meant to offend. This article is not my art. This article is polemics. My art is not an argument; this article is an argument. It is an agon. I am counterattacking all those who threaten me, who back me into various corners, who invade my fields. Even so, it is not strictly correct to say that I intend to offend Kinkaid or Ross or Arp or anyone else. My intention is not offense. My intention is refutation. Offense does not win an argument. A superior argument wins an argument, especially if it is allied to persistence and earnestness and humor and insight. This is my intention. Or, I could be lying.

# The Greatest Irony

by Miles Mathis



In my response to John Carey's new book *What Good are the Arts?* the subject of the "common man" was a central concern. Neither he nor I were very precise in our definition of the common man. Some contemporary writers have called this statistical or theoretical person the man on the street, others have created a group called the masses. In the recent past the common man has been given both to the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. This paper is not about a precise definition, but I do want to fine-tune my grouping a bit before I get started.

Mr. Carey and his biographers take some pains to remind us that he grew up working class. This is only partly to the point, since we are not told if he ever held any jobs that were working class. He may have outgrown his "humble" origins by the time he was 18, graduating directly into the privileged existence he now has, where he can keep bees and ice-dance and, one supposes, drink expensive sherry.

I did not grow up in the slums or even the factories. My parents were and are white-collar (accountants) and we were even members of the country club in my little town in North Texas. But I have held quite a few jobs that were not white collar—that were very working class. In fact I consider my current profession to be blue-collar since I don't work in an office—I work with my hands and produce things directly.

I have waited tables, done light construction, done petty clerical work, watered plants in a tree nursery, bagged groceries, been a disc jockey, dusted pictures in a gallery, and so on. Even after I began selling paintings, I never existed in any rarefied atmosphere (except when I created it myself). I have never been set up at a university or a company or a consortium or any other group. For the most part, the people I have talked to and interacted with have been “common people.” Meaning that they were not rich or powerful, they did not have exciting jobs, they were not from any cultural elite. And even in the few instances that they were, they did not have extensive educations in art. They had a common American art education, which is to say, almost no education at all. Being who I am, I talked art with most or all of them anyway. I still talk art with almost everyone I meet, and almost all of them are common people when it comes to art. Most rich and privileged people are common people when it comes to art, since their money or other elevation did not come from the field of art. Most of them, rich or poor, educated or not, don’t know much about art and admit it cheerfully. For the most part it is because they just aren’t too interested. They tell me what they like and I tell them what I like, and beyond that there isn’t much to say, since if I go off their eyes glaze over and I quickly realize I am boring the pants off them.

What all this means is that I have some experience with what Mr. Carey calls the common person, maybe more than he does. I have hung out in the pool halls and all-night diners and shady bars, the truckstop coffeeshops and foodcourts at the mall and the loud danceclubs. I have some respect for the people there, but no more than they deserve. I don’t glorify them. I don’t think they are especially pure or vital or any of that. Some of them are, most of them aren’t, just like anywhere. But one thing I have discovered that may shock Mr. Carey is that these common people don’t agree with him about art. That is the greatest irony. He has allied himself to a people and thinks he is taking their part in some debate, when in fact he is simply making himself look foolish, *especially* to them. For the fact is that most people who are not “in the arts” in some monetary way don’t like Modernism or the avant garde or the trend by any other name. Not only that, but they don’t want to call a can of excrement art. They do not feel like they are being granted any creative freedoms by being able to call excrement art. They feel the same way about train tickets and Brillo boxes and commodes and all the rest. They really don’t see how they can benefit from the death of art or from its illogical infinite expansion. If anything they are a bit nostalgic. If they are going to take the time to look at art, they would just as soon look at something impressive, like the *David* or *The Birth of Venus*. Not one of the common people wants the hierarchy of art to be dismantled, because if they are impressed by anything it is this hierarchy. If artists aren’t going to show them great things, they would just as soon go to the movies, where the directors will give them hierarchies in spades.

In my experience, the people who like to talk about modernism and postmodernism and the avant garde and poststructuralism and all the rest are not common people but what one might call mid-level intellectuals. People who have just enough cultural education to turn them into blithering idiots. They have taken a course on 20<sup>th</sup> century art or on the Bauhaus or on Derrida or something and they are now flush with new-found power. They have discovered the key to the inner sanctum. They rush home to psychoanalyze the children and to redecorate the doghouse in primary colors. Some of these people subsequently get a lot more “education.” They read lots of recent books with lots of pictures in

them and memorize a vast list of names. But none of it does them any good. They can better browbeat the common people who haven't read these ridiculous books, but they have not found any wisdom. They have only found critical elevation. This elevation allows them to see clearly the artists below them who are working away grubbily. The most ambitious among them become critics or museum directors, and they can lecture to artists on art. Not one of them has the intellectual honesty to see how ridiculous this is, but the common people do.

The common people think it is all a great joke. Art is not their sacred cow. If the artists will not entertain them with art, then sometimes it is worth a chuckle or two to see a group of fools biting their own butts and scratching in public and drooling. It is like watching *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* or like going to the circus back in the '20's: "Come see the Freaks! Pay a dime and see the rich and privileged people acting like cretins! They will say anything no matter how asinine! Step right up! An Oxford don who thinks shit is art. Step right up! Freakish behavior! Compost in a museum! What will they do next folks? Look, the rich man is paying \$20 million for a cigarette butt! Beautiful. You get your dime's worth here, ladies and gentlemen! I couldn't script it better myself!"

And the rich man and the Oxford don keep posing and primping and scratching, with one eye to the public. They love the attention. They could never draw a crowd any other way. They have no talents beyond being freaks. How could they ever have existed before the circus came to town? And the show is even richer for them, for look, across the way. The doors of the old museum have closed. The crowds are all here, laughing and pointing. The Punch and Judy show has bankrupted the opera house. Joy of joys! All is accomplished. And the rich man and the Oxford don smile at each other. "We have won," they say to themselves. "The artists have left town and the crowd is forever ours! Just think of the money we will make. Now if we can just get rid of those elitist Jewish bastards in Hollywood. Those old-world hierarchists selling that horrible kitsch."

It is never the common people who say this. It is never the common people who want everything watered down and mediocritized and squashed into a strict egalitarianism. The philosophy of non-distinction always comes from the political specialists at the university—the art history experts and cultural studies experts. And it comes from the institutions that these experts seed—the museums and foundations and cultural centers.

The common people have never been that impressed by equal achievement. They like equal opportunity of course, what unprivileged person wouldn't? But the whole point of democracy and *egalite* was for them not mainly to pull the lords down but to raise the lower classes. It may be a temporary thrill to see the prince groveling in the mud at your side, but common people, like everyone else, are more selfish than that. The main point is for them to get into the castle and to sit in the plush chairs themselves and to drink the fine wines themselves and to wear the pretty clothes themselves. The prince can rot or not, but the common person is worried about his own hide, is concerned mainly about *elevating* himself.



This is because the common person is usually clever enough to see that equal opportunity is an empty ark unless there is some ladder to climb. Equal opportunity is not as much about equality as it is about *opportunity*. In that term, "equal" is just the adjective; "opportunity" is the important word—it is the *noun*. Consider this parable: “Everyone has just won a chance to climb to the top of the Empire State Building! No one is denied entry. Come see the beautiful view. You are close to the clouds and the eagles, close to the very gods! Climb as high as your lungs can take you. Oh the freedom. Oh the bliss.” You can substitute the Eiffel Tower or Mount Ararat or Mt. Fuji for the Empire State building if you like.

And then you arrive with your ticket, only to find that the Empire State building or the holy mountain has been demolished overnight, and in its place is a two-story brownstone with an elevator. A sign on the front says that the mayor and the city council felt that many people would not have the lung capacity to make it to the top. It was unfair to them not to have an elevator. And besides, it is dangerous up there! Some people might jump. Others might get dizzy and faint. A few at least would get a queasy stomach. That is risky and unfair. And think of the lawsuits.

Suddenly your ticket isn’t worth so much is it? You might ask why you killed off all the aristocrats for this. You could get a view from a second story window in the slums. And your dreams! You used to see the rich and polished man sitting up there in the clouds, eating his sweetmeats, and you thought, Ah, one day that could be me! I will climb that lofty tower and breath that fresh crisp air. I will have his library, I will know what he knows, I will impress the girls with my great knowledge and my high white collar and the world will swoon. I will have time to learn the violin, or to take up watercolors, or to learn polo by god.

All gone. The dreams of the ignorant masses gone. You may get rich, you ignorant plebe, but you will still be ignorant. Some of us in the world are capitalists and we will grant you your polo pony and your cars, if you are lucky. But the library and the violin and the watercolors and all that upperclass claptrap, forget it. That is just pretension. Theoretically, we can’t allow it. And as for fresh air, get serious.

Well, OK, you can read books if you have to. But for heaven’s sake don’t pretend to learn anything. Collect facts only to further dismantle pretension and hierarchy. If you claim to know more about anything important than the most ignorant person you will be ostracized from the *fraternite*. We don’t want anymore snobbish long-fingered lily-white effete atavisms. Oh, and don’t use big words either, unless they were invented recently. That is just annoying.

I said earlier that I considered myself blue-collar. That was from no desire to ally myself to the common person or the workers or anyone else. I can fight my own battles, and the common people can agree with me or not, it won’t change a thing. I don’t need a thumbs-up from anyone with any collar or no collar. I am blue collar simply because I think I am closer to the dictionary definition and I like to state things the way they are. I don’t honestly think I have a lot in common with “common people”

or with rich people or with anyone else. Art *is* my sacred cow, and that makes me an oddity these days, no matter what company I am keeping. I have a hard time respecting the critics and rich people and “educated” people who think it is poignant and progressive to call shit art. And I have a hard time respecting those of the masses who find amusement in watching art history deconstruct. The people who put sharks in tanks, the people who display sharks in tanks, the people who write about sharks in tanks, and the people who pay to see sharks in tanks are all about equally lost, in my estimation.

A dot of education to all the people above: a shark in a tank may be a bit fascinating, but it is not art. It is a science project. It should be a display at the aquarium, not the art museum. In fact, there are several displays at various aquariums and natural history museums around the world that are similar to Hirst’s display. There is a very good reason that the creators of these displays are not famous artists and are not getting paid millions. The reason is because they are not artists and because the work they did is not worth millions.

In conclusion, there is not an alliance between the avant garde and the masses. The Oxford don has almost no constituency among the common people. He made it up. The choir he is preaching to is mostly with him at the universities and in those uppity institutions that run the arts. It is made up, ironically, of privileged people. Privileged people who want more privilege without having to do anything to earn it. They want the field of art to be theirs, but they don’t want to have to paint or sculpt anything or learn to play an instrument or design a building or learn ballet or practice singing or write any decent novels or poems or even screenplays. They just want to administrate. With real artists around, that isn’t so easy, since real artists don’t like to take orders or be subordinate to self-appointed administrators. So the administrators have hired stand-ins. That is what all those Turner Prize people are. The administrators have taken the van down to the psychiatric ward, rounded up a few people who are still partially mobile, and glued their hands to various tinker-toy projects. Then the stand-ins can go on BBC2 and stutter and mumble and drool and it is great fun for everyone. Who needs Monty Python when we can get a belly laugh from these unfortunate wretches who are the poster people of the avant garde? What a big-hearted people we are, to be sure. After all, we *are* paying them to be our fools.

[go to first essay on Carey](#)

# The Holeness of Jasper Johns

*by Miles Mathis*



The born lover of ideas, the born hater of commonplaces,  
must feel in this country that the sky over his head  
is of brass and iron.—*Matthew Arnold*

Ken Johnson reviews another exhibit in a recent *New York Times* edition (Jan. 8, 2009), this time the Jasper Johns exhibit at MOMA. Johnson begins this way:

The exhibition affords an occasion to ponder its possible deeper currents of meaning. Consider, for starters, “Target with Four Faces” (above). There is the slyly punning relationship between the eyeless faces and the single bull’s eye, which might be construed as representing the limits of individual

perception versus the completeness of transcendental vision. Also there is tension between fragmentation and wholeness, which, embodied as it is in the style of an old carnival game, generates feelings of nostalgic melancholy.

There is that “tension” again that Johnson likes so well to manufacture from nothing, as [he did with Pearlstein](#). Here it is a tension between fragmentation and wholeness. But once again, I have to ask, “Is there a possible tension between fragmentation and wholeness?” No, there is no tension, they are simply opposites of one another. You either have fragmentation or you have wholeness. You cannot have both, so they cannot create a tension. If one is there, the other is not. Tension must be between two present qualities: you cannot have tension between two words, especially when one of them is not applicable.

Do you see any wholeness in that painting? I don’t. I guess Johnson thinks that because we have a circle, we have wholeness. But a circle is a circle and wholeness is wholeness. A circle may represent wholeness, it is true, but it may also represent “holeness” or “donutness” or “targetness.” Given that we are talking about Jasper Johns here and given the circles within circles, I think it is probable we have targetness here, not wholeness.

Is there a tension between targetness and fragmentation? I almost hate to ask, because I am quite certain Johnson could come up with a yes answer somehow. But, if we look at the actual painting, we come up with nothing. There is no tension there, just a flabby idea and a fake mini-mystery that is not worth unraveling. The greater mystery is why anyone bothered painting this, why anyone bothered taking it seriously, and why art history decided to make its creator, Johns, rich and famous. That question certainly creates some tension, at least in me, but I don’t think it is the tension Johnson is talking about.

Johnson also claims there is “a slyly punning relationship between the faces and the bulls-eye”. [Aha, so it IS a bulls-eye, not a wholeness!] As with the tension, Johnson can’t really tell us where the pun is. A pun is normally a humorous ambiguity, but we can’t expect modern critics to know what words actually mean. They don’t use words as denotative or connotative letter compounds anymore, they use them—according to the NYT art criticism handbook—as “colorful suggestions, intimations ripe with relative meaning.” So punning doesn’t really mean “punning” here, it just happens to be the right length and have the right sound on the lips. Besides, the painting doesn’t need to contain any humorous ambiguity: the word “punning” already contains it. The word “punning” gives you a little smile, even applied to nothing, and you can apply that smile to the void of the painting if you like.

The problem is applying this punny smile while you are also drifting into “nostalgic melancholy.” Lot of tensions here, aren’t there? Miraculous, really, how Johns manages to hit every possible human emotion in such a small patch of motionless square-footage. We laughed, we cried, we went to heaven and hell, it was an emotional roller coaster, a technicolor panorama, a feast of extravaganzas, a veritable smorgasbord of dichotomies.



Johnson continues:

“Flag” (1954-55) intimates similar preoccupations. Art historians and critics have observed how neatly this painting of the American flag collapses representation, abstraction and objecthood into an indissoluble yet paradoxical union. Less often mentioned is what the flag represents: united states, multiplicity and oneness.

Johnson is really a perfect fit for this job, I have to admit. Just look at the modern beauty of that first sentence! The painting “intimates similar preoccupations.” You can read that fifty times and still be no better off than before.

“Hey, what’s up, Jasper?”

“Oh, not much, just intimating a few preoccupations!”

And apparently large numbers of important people have observed how neatly this painting collapses representation, abstraction and objecthood into an indissoluble yet paradoxical union. The jiggers, you say! Well, I’ll be.

But wait, couldn’t you say that about any painting, if you were whacked enough to want to? Couldn’t you say it about the Mona Lisa, for example? In the Mona Lisa, we have representation, abstraction, and objecthood, all at once. The image is a representation, Leonardo has used abstract elements to create his image, and the painting as a whole is an object. The Mona Lisa is also an indissoluble union, or just as indissoluble as this flag painting: both are indissoluble until you drop them in a vat of turpentine. And Johns flag is paradoxical only to people who are confused by images of real things that look like the real things. So these nincompoops would also find the Mona Lisa to be paradoxical: they might look behind the frame to see if the lady were really there.

But Johnson isn't finished with his philosophy for dunces, his presentation of painting as *pons asinorum*: he must reiterate that deep assertion about "multiplicity and oneness", which of course is just our old "fragmentation and wholeness" again. Funny that the painting is an "indissoluble union," but it is also an example of fragmentation and multiplicity. I guess he means the sort of fragmentation that maintains union: fragmentation that is not fragmented.

And more:

The beauty of those early works is in how such seemingly impersonal images can convey such plaintive urgency.

I'm sorry, could anyone tell me where to look for "plaintive urgency" in the paintings above? How can a still flag have any urgency, plaintive or otherwise? "Hurry up and look at me before I...before you...before we...nope, I'm still a flag."

It has commonly been supposed that Mr. Johns picked motifs that were relatively empty of meaning so that he could focus without distraction on abstract forms and technical processes.

Johnson also makes this common supposition. But if Johns is focusing on the forms and processes, where does the urgency come in? Where is the tension? Where is the content? The answer: there isn't any. The motifs were empty of meaning to begin with, and Johns did not fill them with anything. He did this on purpose, so that the critics would have something to do. That is why they love him. He is a creative non-entity, which allows them to intimate their own personal preoccupations and to write ridiculous sentences full of manufactured paradoxes and invisible idiocies.



the catenary is the white line hanging in the gray

In his most recent works Mr. Johns has been meditating on a geometric entity called the catenary: the curve of a loose length of string suspended from two points. Dryly abstract as it is, the catenary is not



the most vivid of Mr. Johns's metaphors, but it is a good example of the tension between reserve and self-revelation that has fueled his art for more than five decades.

Johnson is at his creative best here, since he can seem to judge which of John's metaphors is the most vivid. Such a task is beyond me. I honestly couldn't tell you which was the *most* vivid.

But I do agree with Johnson, at last. The catenary *is* a good example of the tension between reserve and self-revelation that has fueled his art for decades. Look closely: the catenary is hanging slack.

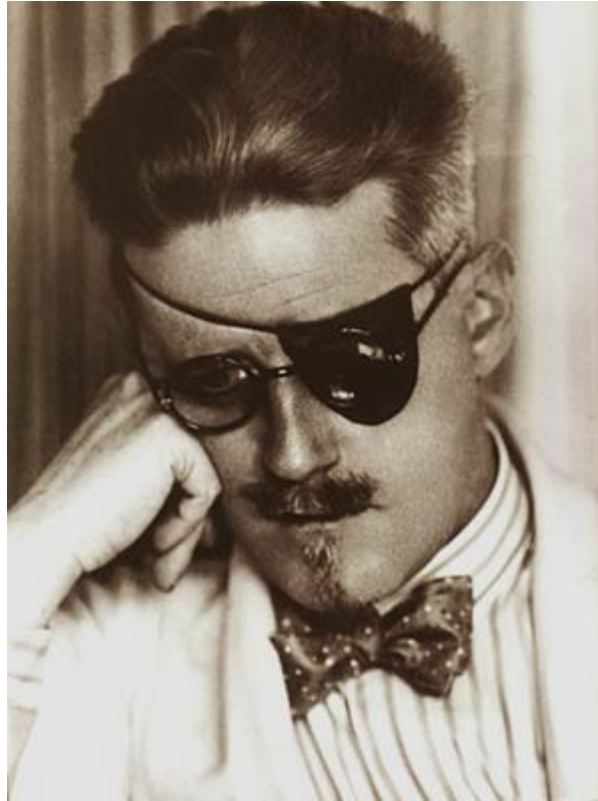
# JERRY'S ARTARAMA HAS NO CUSTOMER SERVICE

This is a short warning to the art world to avoid buying supplies from Jerry's Artarama. Jerry's has no customer service. None. So if you have a problem, you won't be able to talk to anyone about it or get any action. I had a problem with a recent order. They billed me for the whole order, but sent only part of it. I sent two emails and made three phonecalls, but got no response at all. They don't have live customer service, only a message machine. When they fail to respond to those messages, you are screwed. Your only recourse at that point is to contact your credit card company to find out what is going on.

Artists buy from Jerry's because the prices are considered to be very low. But if you are paying for things you don't receive, you aren't getting much of a discount, are you? I recommend Utrecht, which is just as low in price on most things, and Utrecht has a customer service department. There are a couple of mail-order retailers that have a broader and deeper selection than Utrecht, but of the discounters, Utrecht is among the best.

# ON BALLS AND JAMES JOYCE

*by Miles Mathis*



**“Art is upon the town!—to be chucked under the chin  
by the passing gallant—to be enticed within the gates of the householder  
—to be coaxed into company as a proof of culture and refinement.” —*Whistler***

I recently recommended a short book by B.R. Myers entitled *A Reader's Manifesto*, in which Myers includes some of the hate mail he received after publishing a long excerpt in *Atlantic*, criticizing well known writers. The author of one letter jeered, “You didn't have the balls to take on Joyce, did you?” We never learn what Myers thought of Joyce, so his balls remain known only to himself. But it gives me a chance to once more step up to the plate and drop my drawers. I don't like (late) Joyce at all, and you know what, neither did D.H. Lawrence, Robert Musil, Andre Breton, Henry Miller, Evelyn Waugh, Virginia Woolf, Annie Dillard, Ayn Rand, Carl Jung, Tennessee Williams, Gertrude Stein, Wyndham Lewis, or Marshall McLuhan, among many others. What's more, I don't care what the committee at the Modern Library thinks (they voted *Ulysses* the greatest English language novel of the 20th century). When any committee says jump right, I dive left.

Actually, there are several people on the committee I sort of admire from a distance, like Gore Vidal and Antonia Byatt, but I suspect they were outvoted by the others. Honestly, I don't understand how Joyce came out on top, with a committee that also included James Frazier, Edmund Morris, Salman Rushdie, and Caleb Carr. These don't seem like the sort of people who would fawn over James Joyce. And, yes, I would call it fawning, since *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* was #3, and *Finnegan's Wake* was #77. Maybe Richard Howard and his monocle were the only ones who sent in their votes on time—the rest were postmarked a day late.

While we are diverted by this list, I also find it odd that *Lolita* is rated so highly [#4]. The first half of *Lolita* is brilliant, but the second half is just a montage of destinations. Nothing interesting happens from the intermission till the shots fired at the end. And the ending is atrocious: after starting out moraline-free—as Nietzsche would say—Nabokov has to be sure Humbert gets his cosmic comeuppance, in the most absurd manner imaginable. As a short story, it would have been a smashing success; as a novel it is a failure. Only the fact that it has so little first-rate competition can explain its position. Nabokov vanquished most of the list with his first page.

Come to think of it, the first page of *Lolita* could trump thousands of pages of 20th century humbug: works like *The Sheltering Sky* and *Sons and Lovers* and *An American Tragedy*. You know you have lived through a pretty poor century of literature when *Sons and Lovers* is #9. I would much rather read Byatt's *Possession* again than *Sons and Lovers* (I would rather have my balls pierced than have to read *Sons and Lovers* again), but unlike Rushdie, Byatt couldn't make the list despite being on the committee.

Amazingly, we don't see John Updike on the list. This is just the sort of list you would expect him to be on, since Saul Bellow makes it twice, and since Cheever is also there. Apparently the committee could stomach boring plots, but not boring plots underpinned, even slightly, by a Barthian Christianity. Still, I am surprised. We just left an American century where few men read, but the few that did were nerds who had never had fellatio: they had to read about it in *Rabbit, Run*. Yes, we just left a century where authors got famous for using the present tense, or the second person, or for being the first to bring one or the other form of sexuality into the “serious” novel. In this way I am only surprised that Michel Faber's *The Crimson Petal and the White* didn't make the list, since he was the one who saw it was crucial to update Dickens with anal sex. Possibly he was passed over for *Deliverance*, since James Dickey beat him to the punch.

After that, we find a raft of completely manufactured and unconvincing novels, led by *The Magus* and *Native Son* and *Invisible Man*. Is it just a coincidence that Ellison and Wright are next to each other at #19 and #20, or did they forget to shuffle? John Fowles, a man who can't write himself out of a paper balzac, actually makes the list. I had to look twice to be sure his name hadn't migrated over from the readers' poll, along with L. Ron Hubbard. I guess in a century like the 20th, it is hard to round out a list that long. Maybe they should have stopped at 50? Would you believe 25? With *Ulysses* as #1, they should have stopped at 1899.

Just imagine what Tolstoy or Twain would have thought of *Ulysses*. Well, that is precisely what I think of it.

To be clear, I like some of Joyce's early poetry and I like large parts of *Dubliners*. I find *Portrait of the Artist* to be a mixed bag, since while the language and imagery is good and at times very fine, the overall “portrait” is unconvincing: entirely too vignetted for my taste. It is clearly the work of a man in his early twenties: promising but thin.

As for *Ulysses*, I think it is possible to judge the entire book by Joyce's stated intention: “I put in so many enigmas and puzzles that it will keep the professors busy for centuries arguing over what I meant.” He also said he wrote it that way in order to attain “immortality.” A novel written with phony intentions is bound to be phony. *Ulysses* reads like a novel written to confound the bourgeois, and it has done that. Unfortunately (or perhaps fortunately, I don't know) it has also confounded some pretty good writers, like those in the Modern Library Committee. Quite possibly, *Ulysses* was written as a measure of all who read it, and it stands as a clear condemnation of a decade of decades.

Remember that it was written during the first world war, 1914-1918. This period saw the rise of Cubism and Futurism—the jelling of Modernism in all its forms. And *Ulysses* is now admired by the same sort of people who admired and admire Modernism, who admire novelty in all its various guises. Those who find Duchamp clever find Joyce clever, for the same reasons. Those who find Derrida profound because he is a difficult read also find Joyce profound, for the same reason.

But remember what Nietzsche—supposedly a precursor of Modernism—said:

“He grasped with his very hands the only thing the Germans take seriously—“the idea,” which is to say, something that is obscure, uncertain, full of intimations; that among Germans clarity is an objection, logic a refutation.”

Nietzsche was talking about Wagner, but this applies equally well, or better, to Joyce. As does this quote:

“It was the enigmatic character of his art, its playing hide-and-seek behind a hundred symbols, its polyphony of the ideal that leads and lures these youths to Wagner”

We were a century of youths, of lastmen. What was *Ulysses* if not the playing of hide-and-seek behind a hundred symbols? In this way it is fitting that *Ulysses* is at the top of the list. It is symbolic of an entire century, a mannered and incomprehensible capsule of a mannered and incomprehensible century. It is the near-perfect incarnation of the literary pose—surpassed in gumption only by Joyce himself, with *Finnegan's Wake*. It gave the clue to others on the list, like Faulkner and Morrison, but allowed no

surpassing. Like Warhol trying to surpass Duchamp, it couldn't be done. The apex of Modernism had already been reached by 1918, in fiction as in art, and the rest of the century was a denouement.

So while Joyce was probably the most representative and influential writer of the 20th century, he was far from the best. He was a great talent wasted by the requirements of the age. Like Picasso, he allowed his talent to be perverted by the market, by the critics, by the “professors.” No real artist allows his art to be decided by professors, not even a little bit, not even tongue-in-cheek, not even as a form of reverse-field imposture. No real artist writes for critics or publishers, which is why the 20th century saw so few artists. It saw the full spectrum of mediocrity, ambition, and misdirection, but only a few photons of brilliance. It destroyed beforehand any possibility of high art, by having no need for it. It needed the fizz of new forms, not the nectar of content. In this way it also quashed Nabokov, who rarely surpassed the clever. The 19th century might have nurtured Nabokov into a contender against Dostoevsky, but, chasing Joyce, he never got any deeper than the literary and nymphic perversions of Humbert Humbert.

The 20th century was like a callow youth who needs a new mistress each month, and cannot abide a woman without make-up. It pretended that its best acquaintances were a new nobility, but they were just higher-priced hookers.

So what is the greatest novel of the 20th century? *The Grapes of Wrath*. *The Catcher in the Rye* and *Slaughterhouse Five* are perfect in their own ways, but they don't have the weight of Steinbeck. *The Grapes of Wrath* is the only book on the 20th century list that doesn't wilt when you put it on the shelf next to Tolstoy and Dostoevsky.

You certainly can't say this about *The Great Gatsby*, which, read directly after a novel like *Anna Karenina* or *The Idiot*, only serves as a measure of the decline in artistic standards from the 19th century to the 20th. Fitzgerald, assigned to highschoolers, is transparent and tiresome even to the best of them; it must be a mystery to the Muses how he manages to place #2 on a list led by Joyce. What weird unmoored eclecticism could include those two on any list, much less sandwich them at the top? Fitzgerald admitted that he tarted up his short stories with coincidences and improbabilities, giving them “twists that made them into saleable magazine stories.” But no one ever admits for him that *The Great Gatsby* rests on another of these impossible twists. The car driven by Daisy striking Myrtle is a plot-carrying coincidence worthy of John Irving, and no one but an American voter would buy it. Without this incident, the book is a banal list of spiceless adulteries; with this incident, the book is a banal list of adulteries spiced with a miracle. But since the miracle is so obviously supplied by an intrusive and hamhanded author, rather than a god or muse, the spice is all cinnamon and salt. It leaves any sensible person in a pucker.

You certainly can't say it of anything by Hemingway, another master of grade 10 level English. Has anyone ever considered that maybe it is not a good thing that the greatest American novels can be read by teenagers, without them having to consult a dictionary or any annotation? Must we either have a



“muscular” prose, stripped of all commas and complexity, or a purposely puzzled prose like that of Joyce or Faulkner or Morrison, where tenses and times don't match and the speaker is not indicated? Has anyone ever imagined the possibility of a richness that is not faked: the natural complexity of a fertile mind, but with the budding stalks still rowed and labeled for the efficient transfer from mind to mind?

Nor can you say it for Henry James, who maintained the complexity of syntax and structure of the 19th century, but who managed them in chapters and plots of soporific pace and humorless narrative. James was a very good writer but a poor storyteller. He hits all the lows of a Tolstoy, but none of the highs. Like a banker with a felicitous pen, James attains a dry cultured craft, one sustained by an insight broad but not deep. He sometimes entertains us, if we are preternaturally bored, but he never thrills us. We aren't inconvenienced by bad sentences or poorly drawn characters or unbelievable action, but aren't awed by art, either. Emotion is not absent, but it rarely ebbs and swells, never crashes like a wave. James' writing is not a formal minimalism, it is an aesthetic minimalism, where the senses are allowed to lie dormant for hundreds of pages. We smell nothing, taste nothing, touch nothing, only seeing very limited vistas and hearing a flat progression of slowly undulating words. Despite all this, Henry James really is superior to his competitors, and must be near the top of any 20th century list. He makes both Joyce and Fitzgerald look small, though for different reasons.

But woe to the great mind limited to 20th century literature! Like the authors I will come to in a minute, James can't or doesn't want to create sympathetic characters. In the name of realism, and to distance himself from Dickens, James populates his pleasant sentences with pleasant frauds. To take just one example, of the three main characters in *Wings of the Dove*, none are people you would want to spend a moment with, and yet you spend an entire novel with them. Not even the cinema and three pretty actors (including Helena Bonham-Carter) and glorious locations could make this watchable or bearable. Apparently it takes E. M. Forster to make Helena bearable on film, and this only with great editing and cinematic fluffing and a vanfull of wigs.

Many of the other contenders on the Modern Library list are small novels like *Tropic of Cancer*, *Deliverance*, *Portnoy's Complaint*, and *The Postman Always Rings Twice*, all famous for sex scenes (and three of them banned). Again, we have a clear sign of the adolescence of the century. Modern criticism has been very impressed by the “transgressive” writer, and sex in the 20th century was always seen as transgressive, at least in the US and UK. Novels like this were never popular in Europe, since modern Europeans don't see sex as transgressive. This may be why Nabokov had to come here to become famous. He couldn't have hoped to get banned in France. Colette's *Gigi*, considered extremely tame and old-fashioned by the French, would have been banned here in the 40's and 50's, if the churches had gotten wind of it in its original form. It would be banned *now*, by the feminists as well as the churches, if anyone tried to make an age-accurate movie or play from it.

The French never found Henry Miller especially heroic for having sex, or talking about it. Despite being in Paris, Miller could not possibly be more American in his desperate attempt to “justify”

sexuality and pleasure. Americans in the 20th century, no matter what port they were writing from, were either frigid or pornographic: there was nothing in between. They were not capable of honest reaction, because they were always in reaction. They were either running furiously away from sex or furiously toward it, so that they could never see it from a point of stillness. For the reader who has had a lot of sex and pleasure with people he actually likes, Lawrence or Miller or Nin or Roth or any of the rest could not be more tiresome or transparent. They are not tiresome because they are so freely un-Christian or anti-capital, they are tiresome because they are so shackled by their need to respond to culture, to “put a gob of spit in the eye of art.” A real artist does not spit in the eye of art, he makes better art. I admire George Orwell, but his praise of Miller can only be read as a clue to his own sexual problems. There is nothing to praise in Miller beyond sexual bravery, but sexual bravery only impresses those who aren't having sex.

Likewise with Roth. Only the repressed would want to read a list of someone else's habits, or write about their own. Just look at the definition of Portnoy's complaint: “A disorder in which strongly-felt ethical and altruistic impulses are perpetually warring with extreme sexual longings, often of a perverse nature.” That the committee chose this novel to represent Roth proves my point: the greatest good in the 20th century was transgression, and Roth was following Miller into predictable fame among the adolescents. At least Miller pretended he was beyond this war between sex and ethics, claiming to have won it. But the Indians knew 2000 years ago that there is no such thing as sexual perversion beyond non-consent or incest, or any possible war between ethics and sex. The war is a false one, sold by Judeo-Christianity, and not less unsavory when sold tongue-in-cheek by a modern writer. Roth does not end the war, he extends it, and doesn't even broaden it in extending it. The Jewish and Christian religions used the fake war to turn the psyche, but Roth only cheapens the psyche. The method has been taken from the madness.

As for *Deliverance*, I am sick to death of seeing it on these lists. I think it wouldn't be there but for the scene of sodomy, and I see Richard Howard's monocle fogging over. This is supposed to be a manly novel, but it is the opposite. To begin with, modern straight men don't sodomize each other at gunpoint in forests, “hillbilly” or no. The scene is completely unbelievable, except for those who want badly to believe it. Yes, men have consensual sex in forests, in which case it is happily gay; or they have violent sex in prisons, in which case it is unhappily gay; but they don't walk around in the wild with guns, looking for other men to sodomize. The novel is a ridiculous Freudian wishlist for closet homosexuals, complete with bows and arrows and lots of gratuitous violence. The modern novel is a sad commentary on the sad sexual lives people lead, straight and gay. The 22nd century will, I hope, look back on our centuries like we look back on the Victorians. We can't understand how Freud, among the most enlightened, could see fellatio as shocking and bestial, and they won't understand how we could be titillated by *Women in Love* and *Tropic of Cancer* and *Deliverance*.

Even *Sophie's Choice*, a better novel in many ways than these others, falls to this criticism. Kevin Kline tells us in the liner notes that he and Meryl wanted to do the pissing scene. He, like Styron, is showing us how hairy his balls are, and no doubt Meryl's are hairy, too. But the scene is gratuitous in the book

and would have been twice as gratuitous in the movie, taking everything into consideration. Half the pages and ideas in Styron's book are gratuitous, but he can't leave anything out. He can't edit his "genius". Novelists before Lawrence knew that you don't have to tell the reader everything. Hardy didn't need to tell us of Tess' every flush. Dostoevsky didn't have to detail Alyosha's every wet dream, Ivan's every jerk. A good novel is about mood as much as anything, and a complete realism at all points cannot maintain a mood.

Hardy himself died on these very rocks, trying to prove his modern grit by manufacturing unease in *Jude the Obscure*. In order to increase the tragedy he put all the murderous disease of the century into the mind of a child, where it could not possibly exist. In one disastrous scene, he destroyed the children, the novel and himself as a novelist. He never wrote another novel, and we may be thankful he didn't.

Unfortunately, others took over where he left off, and the modern novel has become a stringing together of manufactured disasters: murders and rapes and accidents of fantastic shape and feature, from Clyde pitching Roberta from the canoe to John's mother being killed by an Owen Meany line drive. What started with small casts of slightly loathsome characters, as in *Wings of the Dove* in 1902, became large casts of completely loathsome characters, as in you name it after 1920. The only thing that is more tiresomely inartistic than sexual bragging is manufactured tragedy, especially when it is not tragic. Clyde Griffiths, for example (in the mis-titled *An American Tragedy*, 1925), is not a tragic figure, he is an ambitious little punk and the murderer of his {common law} wife and child. Dreiser tries to manufacture "pathos" at the end with the letters to mamma, but doesn't even achieve bathos. One is left with no real emotion, except perhaps the desire to bash both Clyde and Dreiser in the face with a camera.

We could say the same of *Appointment in Samarra*, which, due to the choice of characters, produces no tragedy or pathos. We can't wait for the bastard to kill himself and we cheer when he does so. We only wish he had taken the rest of the town out with him, along with the author. O'Hara is trying to one-up Fitzgerald, and does so by creating a cast that is even less sympathetic than Gatsby's clan. A nuclear bomb could hit in scene one act one in either novel and save us a lot of reading time.

This has become the default mode of the modern novel. It is difficult to create likable characters, of the Copperfield or Little Nell variety, and is passé to boot, so why try? Far easier to juggle a cast of assholes, since this will be immediately pegged as "realistic." When they all die or commit suicide or get gang raped at the end, we won't have to shed a tear, either. We will simply comment on the justice of it all, although we don't believe in that kind of justice.

"Serious" writers and critics always bemoan the fact that *The Lord of the Rings* is so popular, but Tolkien had a talent none of them have: creating characters you want to see alive on the next page. In the modern novel you only turn the page to see who will be bloodied or brutalized next, you rush from death to death, from murder to suicide, and greet each demise with relish: you can't wait for each sorry

bastard to meet his maker in the gruesomest fashion imaginable. But with Tolkien you hope to see your friends on the next page, whole and safe. How retro! How backwards! How utterly un-modern and uncool and unrealized! How unrealistic! Realism is hoping everyone dies as soon as possible, with maximum pain and remorse.

Yes, the moderns have a very queer notion of realism. We can trace this all the way back to Flaubert, and the fame of *Madame Bovary*. Madame was not likable, and no one else in the novel was either, but the sentences were so perfect, and the French people so ahead of their time and modernly self-loathing, it had to be a masterpiece. Zola followed in this line, creating realistic portraits of despicable or boring people, and the English language novelists soon took up the torch. James inherited the boring part, and Dreiser inherited the despicable part. *Sister Carrie*, 1900, is just *Madame Bovary* in the new century. In 1900 as in 1856, being a “kept woman” was almost as good as anal sex, and the first edition of Dreiser's first novel was released in a textbook cover to fool the censors. Fifty years later the author and publisher would have begged to be banned, knowing what that would do to sales, but promotion was in its infancy then.

Now, almost 110 years later, Carrie looks just as naïve and backwards as Madame, since we have perfected the loathsome cast. Carrie's ability to transgress is relatively poor. Turn of the century Chicago looks like an episode of *Bewitched* compared to modern day New York or London or Los Angeles. Carrie's idiocies and shallownesses are nothing next to the sins on display in *American Psycho* or *The End of Alice* or *Made in the USA*. All in the name of realism.

But consider that the definition of “fiction” is “not real”. Non-fiction is reality, and fiction is supposed to be the *other* category. As Whistler told us in his *Ten o'clock Lecture*, “Nature seldom succeeds in producing a picture.”

“The sun blares, the wind blows from the east, the sky is bereft of cloud, and without, all is of iron. The windows of the Crystal Palace are seen from all points of London. The holiday-maker rejoices in the glorious day, and the painter turns aside to shut his eyes.”

Whistler was not recommending fantasy or surrealism, understand. He was recommending an aesthetic arrangement of reality—“as the musician gathers his notes, and forms his chords, until he brings forth from chaos glorious harmony.” Realism in art and fiction is a mistaken goal. Tolstoy knew this before the modern age, and warned us of it in *What is Art?*

“When we appraise a work according to its realism we only show that we are talking not of a work of art but of its counterfeit.”

The painter should not compete with the photographer and the novelist should not compete with the documentarian. The iron sky is already there daily: why paint it? Sister Carries and Madame Bovarys can be met by the dozens, if one desires; why read about them? Clyde Griffiths was based on Chester

Gillette, whose trial had already appeared in the papers. Why read a falsified account when you can read the true one? If realism is the goal, wouldn't you learn more from the actual events? What is realistic about a falsified account, trying to make us feel what we would not feel from the real events? This is not what Whistler meant by selection. It is one thing to arrange a harmony and an entirely other thing to dress a disharmony as a harmony. One is art, the other, propaganda.

We see this again with *Native Son*, Richard Wright's bastardization of Steinbeck's vastly superior *Of Mice and Men*, published just three years earlier. Seeing how Steinbeck created sympathy for Lennie, Wright tried to do the same for Bigger Thomas, but it fails miserably. Wikipedia says, "While not apologizing for Bigger's crimes, Wright is sympathetic to the systemic inevitability behind them." No, Wright tries to manufacture this "systemic inevitability", but cannot because we know that almost all poor black men in Chicago's South Side ghettos did not and do not "accidentally" kill white ladies, saw them up and burn them, and then rape and kill their own girlfriends. Unlike Steinbeck's murder scene, Wright's is not believable. The action is not credible, much less inevitable. The plot is so poorly executed, Wright's story comes off as an insult to black men, not as an excuse for them. The black man, as represented by the large and stupid Bigger, can't help but be a criminal, even when he has no intent to be. The violence, rather than being tragic or cathartic or poignant, is again gratuitous. Since the violence is gratuitous and the inevitability manufactured, the moral of the story is ungrounded, which makes it propaganda. We have not learned a lesson, we have been pushed over a fake line by pure force, by the inability to stop reading.

I think I have now bludgeoned, raped, and suicided a greater part of the list and can feel somewhat avenged for the weeks and months of my life wasted reading this critically acclaimed garbage. We think that our children are warped by TV and Hollywood, but consider the high school and college English classes, and the reading lists we assault them with. I say this not as a Christian moralist, but as an artist. The only consolation I take is that at least the lists in high school don't include Roth or Miller or Lawrence or Dreiser or Ellis or Faber or Homes or Letts: the kids go straight to internet porn, and thank god for that. If they are especially healthy and lucky, they skip the porn and find a nice lover, but, American teenage life being what it is, that is rare. Most don't have a chance of that until college, and many never find it.

I maintained sanity as a teenager not by reading transgressive novels but by lusting naturally after Samantha Stephens or Jan Brady, and if I had been privy to Jan or Sam nude, in life or photos, so much the better. It is not being introduced to sexuality that is warping for kids, it is being introduced to propaganda posing as art, and bad art posing as good art. Henry Miller and his promoters are the ones who deserve a gob of spit in the eye, not for being immoral but for passing off formless journals as something special. The entire artistic and literary establishments should be shunned, not as transgressive, immoral, or perverse, but as boring, inartistic, and false. They should be shunned because the museums are empty of real art, the poetry journals are bereft of poetry, and the novels don't tell interesting stories or contain interesting ideas. You might as well buy a car that that doesn't have a steering column, tires, or a gastank.

Tom Wolfe predicted we would see a reversal of this at the turn of the century, but he was wrong. We have seen no reaction, no return to sympathetic characters and well told tales. No return to beautiful paintings or inspired poems or any displays of real genius. Just more effort to shock and transgress, more montages of nothing, more solipsism, more mental masturbation, more rehashed plots, more stale platitudes, more remakes of things never properly made to start with, and more absurd critical claims of relevance. Yes, the margins contain a few blips here and there, as always, but the mainstream refuses to notice them and they quickly flicker and pass. They pass while the major outlets continue to press us with a million forms of propaganda and fake art. We have to hear a long loud drumroll for each new infinite jest, but hear not a plink for any new finite seriousness. Robert Hughes can complain of a Schnabel, but he can't locate a new Chardin. Wolfe can promise us a new Renaissance, but cannot find anything to promote but himself. Schjeldahl assures of the continued brilliance of culture, but confirms it only with a re-show of Ryman's white canvases from the 60's. Feminism brags of the rise of the female, but then offers us Eve Ensler as proof. In truth there is no rise of anything, male or female, in the mainstream, only a quick decline to newer and newer negative numbers. Charles Demuth, alive today, would be painting ever larger negative fives, and Jasper Johns should be painting gray noughts and sub-noughts. John Currin has graduated from unintentionally illustrating Charles Bukowski's *Women* to accidentally illustrating *Portnoy's Complaint*. As for literature, the novel is far from any nadir, and we can only expect worse. Yes, Dubuffet gave us the completely fake book in 1962, but that was considered visual art, not literature. No one has yet done a John Cage sitting-on-the-piano cleverness with the novel, and we have the blank poem and novel to look forward to: the white page or stained page or slashed page or cum-splattered page as the *New York Times* bestseller in fiction. The novel that opens physically like a Bruce Nauman skit, with a pie in the eye or squirt of piss or a looped laughtrack. Thirty bucks in hardback for a coffee-table book that proves you are avant, by containing only sheep's entrails or a used condom or Hunter S. Thompson's left testicle.

So much to look forward to! "*Vere do vee begin?*"



# Ragnar Kjartansson and *The End*

by Miles Mathis



Today [June 3, 2009] the *New York Times* ran [a long article](#) on the artist Ragnar Kjartansson. Kjartansson, 33, is working on a performance piece for the Venice Biennale, where he is the representative from Iceland. His piece, entitled “The End”, is “a farcically romantic idea of what the end of the world might look like, at least for an artist.” To prevent you from wasting precious seconds guessing what that might be, I will tell you that it is Kjartansson painting from a live model for six months, then posting that *oeuvre* as a performance. What is supposed to make the performance somewhat hellish—or end-of-the-world-ish—is that Kjartansson must paint from the same model the entire time: a man in a black speedo with a beer and cigarette. He must also paint a new one every day.

Neither the artist nor the Biennale nor the writer are interested in the actual canvases covered in that period, they are only interested in the farcical content of the performance. Yes, in the modern world, painting from the live model is now considered a farcical performance. Kjartansson doesn't even have to try very hard to insert the farce into the performance by choosing an obviously farcical subject. A man in a black speedo is boring, inartistic, and pointless, but it isn't especially farcical, since Kjartansson's model is not grossly fat, is not missing any limbs, is not a transvestite or a hooker or an addict, and is not making any effort to be comical, blackly or otherwise. The fact that the artist is attempting to paint in a realistic manner is all the farce required here.

As with [Dennis Hopper](#), we are doubly removed from art. But while Hopper pretends to be a pretend artist, Kjartansson pretends to be a real artist. Kjartansson's second level of abstraction from reality is that he isn't *really* pretending to be a real artist. He is pretending to pretend to be a real artist.

The writer seems to understand that this farce cuts both ways. He says,

“In the manner of many young artists now, he seems to be trying to express a kind of simultaneous reverence and mockery, though maybe only the mockery of ribbing himself for longing to be a more traditional artist.”

Cutting, but not nearly cutting enough. Kjartansson has done this before. Last year he pretended to be a *plein air* painter, setting up an expensive traveling easel in upstate New York, reading *Lolita* and smoking cigars in between bouts of fake painting. It was supposed to be funny, but was only funny to those pathetic people “in the arts”, all born with the same birth defect, whereby the funnybone, instead of being in the usual place at the tip of the elbow, is instead buried at the base of the sacrum, where it conflicts with the normal use of their keisters.

To be clear, it wasn't funny because it completely failed to skewer the intended target. When Dana Carvey pretends to be Clinton or Bush, it is actually funny, because Carvey 1) has a talent for comedy, 2) has a talent for impersonation, 3) has a talent for finding absurdity and highlighting it. Unlike real comedians, contemporary artists never have any of these talents. They think they only have to choose a subject and all the “farce” automatically attaches to it. They forget that they have to do something that is funny or clever or poignant.

Kjartansson only makes himself look pathetic, which admittedly is more poignancy than one is used to seeing from modern art. In trying to paint and failing, he achieves nearly the high artistic effect of a mime trying to walk against the wind. As proof of this, see the painting above, which is just a cartoon. It isn't a terrible cartoon, by modern standards, but, given the situation, it can only seem sad, like the sad mime. Only if it were much much worse could it avoid some of this pathetic sadness.

Likewise, the article in the *Times* is also sad, to the artistic level of a sad mime, since it also tries to reach the level of real writing, but fails. A real article would tell an interesting story, but the arts are out of interesting stories. So we get a long sad parade of articles like this, year after year, mimicking the form of an interesting story, without the interest. We have an almost nude model, a palazzo in Venice, an artist, and a big expensive show: the ingredients of an interesting story. But all we have at the end is a no-one pretending—tongue-in-cheek—to be a some-one, and a non-writer pretending to be a writer, and a non-arts section pretending to be an arts section, and a non-newspaper pretending to be a newspaper. Our white mascara runs down our cheeks as we weep onto our black Capezios.

The saddest part of this whole soppy story is that neither the artist nor the writer are aware of the fact that the end of the world, for the real artist, was many years ago. Kjartansson implies in the article that the economic crisis, which has already decimated Iceland, will destroy art in the near future. This is strictly delusional, since there is nothing to destroy. Art has been dead for almost a century. I have no fear of the future, artistically, because I have been living in an artistic hell all my life. The economic crisis may affect the fake artists like Kjartansson, and for that reason I welcome it; but it can have no affect on art. An economic crisis can only affect the markets, and there has been no market for real art

for as long as I can remember.

Kjartansson and the all the other modern people have no conception of either heaven or hell, in an artistic sense. They cannot experience either the highs or the lows, because their brains are frequency modulated and art is modulated by *amplitude*. They are constitutionally set to vibrate to quantity, but art concerns quality. They cannot possibly experience the joy of creating a great painting, because they are not artists, and they cannot experience the hell of living in a milieu taken over by phonies, because they are these phonies. Kjartansson can only experience the smaller hell of having once been famous in a small way, which, for quantity-minded people must indeed be a bit of a fall. But at least Kjartansson and the rest can console themselves with the knowledge that their loss was the gain of art history.

## a Letter from the Artist

*by Miles Mathis*



And when the evening mist clothes the riverside with poetry, as with a veil, and the poor buildings lose themselves in the dim sky, and the tall chimneys become campanili, and the warehouses are palaces in the night, and the whole city hangs in the heavens, and fairy-land is before us—then the wayfarer hastens home; the working man and the cultured one, the wise man and the one of pleasure, cease to understand, as they have ceased to see, and Nature, who for once has sung in tune, sings her exquisite song to the artist alone, her son and her master—her son in that he loves her, her master in that he knows her.

—*James Whistler*

As an artist, I convene with ghosts. The burnt earth and raw oil in my paints, the wet clay that forms into eyes and ears, the hair in a brush from hog or marten, the pastel chalk—just colored dirt: all re-enchanted from the bones of Rodin or van Gogh or Whistler. All become my work; all tell me stories.

This is one. I see Whistler perched birdlike, hair a-plume, over a rickety portable easel on a muddy embankment, a cane's length above the steams and discharges of the Thames, by some transparent

barges lolling cowishly in the murk, maybe, or under a brooding bridge, elf-lit blue and green from the watery air. I see a rush-clad maiden, fresh from her brown ablutions, climb leafy and dripping to add her final blurry strokes. And I see her slip back down to the deep, mermaid eyes awake for the next drowning.

This is another, more prosaic. The Muse has slept long in the Great Rift. Seaweed-lazy and capricious as marshlight, she has always resisted invocation. Whistler, intuitively aware of painting's essence, knew what would wake her. Privy to the proper rituals and incantations, he countermanded the siren call. But he was among the last. Even in the 19th century, which has now acquired a nostalgic sheen and begins to rival the Renaissance in its myth-making potentiality, great painting was rare. The salons and academies produced many virtuoso technicians, but the treatment required for a memorable painting remained elusive. In the belly of the sea, the Muse now sleeps.

This is another, long and awake. What was then rare has now become endangered. With the fall of the old gods—beauty, subtlety, lyricism, sentiment, the Virgin, the Hero, even, according to Nietzsche, God himself—inspiration has dissipated like the fogs and vapors of Whistler's nocturnes. There is no longer supplication to any Muse. There is no question of transcendence or redemption or revelation or even resignation. All humility, all wonder in the face of the Unknowable is gone. Art in the 20th century, as far as it has been considered to have any historical importance, has simply not concerned itself with any aesthetic considerations. Aesthetics, as the philosophy of beauty, became obsolete a hundred years ago. Up to then, from the hairy horses and buffaloes of Lascaux to the feathered dancing fowl of the Peacock Room, art had been in some sense continuous, a cohesive progression (if not teleological at least organic), branching and leafing out into recognizable buds—sometimes flowering, sometimes not. But art history has left this natural itinerary, this garden path where Nature was our teacher and the world, both our experience of it and our feeling for it, our inspiration. Now an attraction to beauty, and especially human beauty—tainted as it is by the politics of sexuality—is no more than a sign of bad taste. And Praxiteles, that most refined among the ancients, would, were he to reappear among us, chisel still ringing from the curves of fair Phryne, be dismissed as a rube, an unrepentant pre-Hegelian earthchild with no conception of the super-excellence of abstract thought. The same can be said of van Gogh, at the other end of pre-Modern art history. Vincent, were he alive today, shambling around toothless in his pale-blue peasant frock on the periphery of the contemporary art markets, would be exponentially more isolated and hopeless here than he was in Brabant or Arles in the 1880's. He might find something to paint in the hills of West Virginia, but not even the endless goodwill and faith of his brother Theo could now find a link between his idealism and the reality of the modern markets. The materialism he found so oppressive has increased ten-fold, and his redemptive view of Nature and humanity is considered not just quaint or passe, but infantile. People are astonished that van Gogh sold only one or two paintings in his lifetime, as if we have progressed beyond such ironic unfairness and value-blindness. But the truth is he would not do *as well* now. If realism had marginalized passion by 1880, it had all but excised it by 1980. And van Gogh's sensibilities, despite the lip-service given to his "integrity," are not only not encouraged in young painters, they are unimaginable. As for the avant garde, it now has no more in common with van Gogh's transcendentalism than it does with Praxiteles' paganism. Michelet, in van Gogh's time, could still verbalize Praxiteles' unspoken goal: *la femme c'est*

*une religion*. But that god, like all others but Mammon, is now dead. Van Gogh existed on the outskirts of a dying star; today he would have to survive on the edge of a black hole.

Art is no longer art, painting is no longer painting, sculpture is no longer sculpture. The Muse looks long for a lover. In the revaluation of all values that has transformed art in this century, the very notions of beauty and inspiration have become outdated. An artist who finds them pertinent subjects for discussion is a recidivist, a dangerous Neo-Luddite, lost to Modernism and the topics of the day. What was of interest to Whistler or Zola or Baudelaire or van Gogh is now considered antediluvian, part of the fossil record, of no possible consequence for those who have known of Hiroshima and Auschwitz, who have watched a Moon Landing on a color screen, who have bought donuts and condoms from vending machines, who have shopped by phone, who have read, or claimed to have read, Derrida and Lacan. The brutalism of Modern art is explained as a reaction to the two World Wars and the rise of neo-Imperialism and materialism in the U.S. But this does not explain Michelangelo (who lived through eleven popes, the burning of Savonarola, and the sack of Rome) or any pre-Modern art since, which was created in the midst of plagues, famines, religious persecutions and atrocities of horrific detail, and continuous war. Hitler did not invent fascism. Almost all regimes prior to the Enlightenment, and most since, were fascistic. Yet art of beauty and depth, which none but the most agenda-inebriated could connect to fascism (or any sort of politics), *was* created. The idea that art is politically determined is the only real novelty of the 20th century, but none of the world's great art before 1910 lends it any credence. Twentieth century art is politically determined only because it is defined as such: work must conform to the theoretical rubric to be called art. Theory is the new fascism, and it has proven itself a much more powerful tool of top-down control than any of the historical pressures from the aristocracy or the markets. More non-artists have more influence on art than ever before.

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We are told, by those who do not or cannot paint or sculpt, that art must be timely; that we must read the right things and show that we have read the right things; that we must beware of our instincts, beware what gives pleasure. We must understand that art is a tool of progress. We must follow one simple rule. In every sentence, past, present and future, replace "art" with "the politics of art."

More specifically, we who are attracted to *la terre*, to flesh and mud, who find some atavistic kinship with the *objet*, must understand that the failures of propagandized realism during the Third Reich and under Stalin damn all previous figurative and depictive art, and taint any such attempts in the future. We must understand that every stroke of the brush, every chisel groove is forsaken of innocence, is marred by the sins of our fathers, must now be an expression of solidarity. In every sentence, past, present and future, replace "art" with "the politics of art."

In both popular magazines and critical journals, the story of the transformation of art to *art moderne* has been standardized, and the view of both the past and of the future of art is well-established, if not monolithic. The groundwork laid by writers in the first half of the century, despite being hopelessly abstract and incomplete, has held up remarkably well. Roger Fry, Clive Bell, Leo and Gertrude Stein, Clement Greenberg: these are the inventors of Modernism, not Picasso or Kandinsky or whoever you



like. And this new art theory has never even suffered a strong challenge, so well has it administered its social tonic from the beginning. In a society obsessed with social science, the new art has been like cake, no matter how airy or false. And little has changed over the years but the frosting. Adam Gopnik, for instance, now confirms Greenberg's purifying inventions from 1949 and none the wiser: he said recently in *The New Yorker*, "Renaissance illusion had become illustration and could be sustained only by government diktat, as in socialist realism, or by commercial cynicism, as in Saturday Evening Post covers." In letting stand this 50-year-old slander, Gopnik matches Greenberg's presumption without his courage. For he gores an ox that is now assumed to be hornless. Gopnik knows, or thinks he knows, that no one now gives a damn about art except those for whom it is politically expedient. Modern art is expedient for artists who cannot draw or paint or sculpt. And it is expedient for writers who require a language-based art: successful visual art does not require their help or goodwill. And it is expedient for vendors and buyers of art who have no eye and no soul, and who must rely therefore on reputation. And so "realism" has become an easy target at the end of the century. One need not even be coherent in discussing it anymore. Parrot the proper shibboleths and one is a progressive intellectual. In one sentence, Gopnik, parroting Greenberg, whittles object painting down to "illusion," then to illustration, and finally to commerce. But this kind of wording is disingenuous to the highest degree. It implies the equivalence of all "realism," and allows for its easy dismissal, Raphael as well as Rockwell. It implies not only that the essence of Raphael or Titian was illusionism, but also, and more importantly, that 20th century realism is exhausted by the categories Gopnik/Greenberg invents.

But Renaissance art cannot be judged as illusionist. Nor does it make any sense to say that realism can now be sustained only by diktat. It sounds impressively Stalinist, but is finally spurious. Realism has only been *suppressed* by critical diktat, a diktat from non-artists to artists that is finally losing its charm. It takes a chilling level of reduction to analyze realism, as everyone from Fry to Gopnik has done, into such readily taggable boxes, each baby pre-packaged in his own bathwater, ready for postage.

The fact is that art is neither novelty, nor decoration, nor social commentary, nor illusion; and to continue to suggest that it must be is to be a nuisance. Specifically, to perpetuate the idea that all pre-Picassan art is aristocratic illustration or a socially determined advertisement for the status quo is to admit to a complete ignorance of art history. Michelangelo was no courtier; Rembrandt, no prince's bagman; nor Velasquez nor El Greco nor Goya. And what of van Gogh: why did van Gogh not dissolve into some nihilist or chronicler of horrors? Is it not the milieu but the man that makes the artist?

In America it is not. One magazine, speaking of David Salle, says that "his paintings [are] among the works that most authoritatively express our time and are apt to become its permanent monuments." What is not considered is the question of whether an artist would *want* to be a monument to this culture. Perhaps the terms "artist" and "monument to 20th century culture" are mutually exclusive. What we should ask of an artist is not for him to be a monument to culture, but to be an artist, regardless of his culture, and to influence culture as an artist. An artist, I claim, does not wet a finger and hold it to the wind searching for a zeitgeist. That is what we have politicians for.

But in the art journals, and among the critics, aesthetics has been reduced, or deconstructed, to "relevance." A critical reading of a text or a context (in the parlance of the day) implies no judgments of

quality or implications of emotional content. That is to say, a critic is interested in a work of art only for its intent. The significance of a work of art, for its reviewer, has become its interpretive value—its ability to provide a springboard into (what are understood to be) more interesting discussions of a psychological, political, or literary nature. Not only is there almost no argument about the artistic merit of any individual work, there is next to no interest in what art is or should be, on its own terms. A recent poll in the *New Yorker* of the biggest names in the arts, asking *What is Art?*, confirmed that no one any longer has the courage of his conviction: art is now "whatever people say it is." No one wanted to go on record with even the broadest, most inclusive definition. No positive definition of art is inclusive enough. Art must now be politically and socially all-embracing, to ward off attacks from the left, and yet be intellectually and linguistically hyper-exclusive, to impress the curators and buyers. It cannot be both, except in the mazes of post-colonial, post-Chomskyan theory, and so it is best to keep quiet when answering outsiders. Art and art theory are now exclusive not in claiming to any sort of eminence, as they did as recently as Greenberg, but only in their academic lingo and PC insiderism. The kind of grand theoretical posing that was stylish in the 50's and 60's has been added to the list of pretensions, and no one would think of taking an exclusionary stance against any abstract idea (except "the past"). In general, everything is art except what used to be art. Anything that does not offend the current conceptions of egalite is potentially art. Anything that defends the current conceptions of egalite is not only art, it is ambitious art.

There is no interest in defining art because, for those who have other agendas, an artistic agenda would be intrusive. Art criticism is now simply a tool for those writers who find it convenient. A hundred years ago, there was much talk of *ars gratia artis*—art for the sake of art. But such non-utilitarian philosophy is now passe. What art is for at the end of our century has become clear: art is a resource for anyone in the arts. It is a tool the usefulness of which is to be judged by the use a critic or curator or dealer is able to make of it. A work of art is no longer the child of the artist, an unnameable gift; it is something altogether different. For the avant garde, an artifact is equivalent to a post-structural text. That is, its meaning is the battlefield of various interpretations—interpretations supplied to us by writers. The artist, unless he is also a writer, cannot join this battle. He is superseded. His only role is as the supplier of a text—a text chosen for its applicability. How this effects who may and who may not become known as an artist is obvious.

To keep up with the expectations and demands of the "arts professionals," visual art has become more linguistic, more social, more intellectual, more analytic, more political. In Freudian terms, there has been a displacement of artistic inspiration out of the Id and into the Ego and, especially, the Superego. The struggles of the great pre-Modern artists were highly personal, irrational, non-verbal, quasi-religious: the works of these masters symbolized a yearning for some sort of understanding or connection that admitted of no political or social solution, nor of any critical or psychological explication. Because it was beyond these rational categories, because it was not capable of being expressed or communicated in any other way, it had to be offered up as art. This was truly an art for itself: not art for the sake of color, or for line, or for the sake of art theory, but art defined as a form of expression not like any other and not requiring any other.

Whistler himself saw, as early as the 1870's, the potential catastrophe of a burgeoning art commentary, and the trumping power of the word over the image. Ironically, his talents as a writer may

have saved him from utter obscurity. Little was made of the substance of his arguments: he tried to limit the inroads of the critic by narrowing and clarifying the definition of high art, by putting the artist in control of aesthetics, and by attacking the critic directly as a man lost in his neighbors' fields. He said for instance,

“Art, that for ages has hewn its own history in marble, and written its own comments on canvas, shall it suddenly stand still, and stammer, and wait for wisdom from the passer-by?—from the hand that holds neither brush nor chisel?”

But Whistler proved his point only by being his own best marketing strategist. His trenchant letters to the various London journals, his alias as the Prince of Persiflage and the Master of Badinage, and his *Ten O'Clock Lecture* made his name with the public more than any of his finest etchings or oils. At the same time that he was arguing that art must be judged on its own terms, he was being judged as a personality. But he was the last artist of real talent to win the right to define himself to the world. And even Whistler was only capable of propping up his own career. He had no effect at all on the Steins and Bells and Frys who would co-opt art theory in the next generation. The critics will never warm to a theory of art that does not invent one of them as kingmaker.

The career of Picasso is a perfect example of this. Influenced by, among many others, van Gogh and Puvis de Chavannes, Picasso was a child of the late 19th century. Woman was, and remained, his religion. But even the unmatched passion and beauty of his early work (of his Blue and Rose Periods, of his Harlequins) could not win him notice in the art markets of the early 1900's, which were already beginning to be dominated by the critic and other non-artists. If he had continued to paint in this vein his ears might have become the worse for wear, but Picasso was a better listener than van Gogh. The critics asked for art as an exercise of the intellect: he gave them Cubism. They asked for art that needed a theory: he gave them Collage Cubism. They, and the revolutionaries, asked him for art as politics (propaganda): he gave them *Guernica*. Once famous, he was free to return to Woman. But this freedom says nothing for the passion of Modern art: the critics still do not like Early Picasso (before 1906), and the passionate nudes of his later years would not have been accepted from anyone but Picasso. They did not have the proper content—or more precisely, *lack* of content.

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From its beginnings as a non-verbal expression of an emotional state, as a simple "sharing of self," art has now reached the post-structural equivalent of an agon. Every work is read as a text, and the literary critic and art critic are interchangeable. Harold Bloom, the present Elder Statesman of American literary criticism, has embraced the revolutionary concept that a text is a *mise-en-scene*, a dramatic arena for a Greek-style agon: that is, a fight. The readers of a text fight to give it meaning, the smartest reader winning the laurel. This theory is revolutionary because it is a reader-centered theory, as opposed to a artist-centered theory. It was once assumed that a story or a poem had a pre-read meaning. The meaning of a literary work was the meaning the author had put into it, both consciously and unconsciously. For Bloom and almost every contemporary reader (and writer), this assumption has proved to be theoretically limiting. It disallows many things that many people want to allow. So

Bloom's powerful arm of modern critical theory has redefined "meaning" as the most persuasive reading (or combination of readings) of a text. This Ptolemaic revolution puts the readers in control of the work. It is somewhat like putting the planets in control of the Sun. It purposefully encourages a misunderstanding of the reader's proper place in relation to a text. The creation of a greater mind is used only as a tool to further the agenda of a later and lesser mind. What the author said or meant is of secondary or no matter. What he can be made to say is the game. Critics no longer talk of "uncovering or discovering" meaning, but of "creating" or "giving" meaning, as if a text had no more pre-authorship than an onion skin.

What few seem to realize is that any debate may turn on the blurring of only one important distinction. Bloom would argue that, in the absence of a dead author, such as Shakespeare, readers *must* arbitrate meaning. There is no one else to do it. And even with living writers, who is to judge meaning that the writer may have put in unconsciously? Writers are not aware of unconscious meaning. That is why it is "unconscious." Can a writer be made aware of his unconscious states? Should he be consulted, to verify whether a hypothetical reading sounds right? Readers are, in fact, responsible for all standing interpretations of all works. Why not say so?

My answer is that there is a world of difference between admitting that readers are responsible for interpretation, and admitting that interpretation is meaning. This is no semantic subtlety: the whole argument hinges on it. Interpretation is (or should be) the discovery of meaning, not the creation of meaning. Interpretation is the discovery of a pre-existing idea, an idea already contained in the text. That is what interpretation *means*. If the idea is contained in the text, then the meaning adheres to the text, not the interpretation. If it is not contained in the text, then the interpretation is super-textual: that is, it is wrong. Super-textual interpretation is wrong for the very reason that it poses as meaning. Rather than clarifying or revealing a text, it adumbrates it. The critic's ideas get mixed with the author's, always to the benefit of the critic. If a critic has something to say that is super-textual (an original idea), he should say it in his own context, in his own poem or novel. Then he may be judged on equal terms with other writers. This would be a true agon.

The definition of "reading" has changed in the last thirty years. The point of reading, in pre-postmodern times, was understanding. Literature was approached as a source of wisdom: the author's wisdom, not the reader's. In order to discover the author's meaning, a reader approached a text with some degree of humility. One read with two basic assumptions: first, that there exists the other—namely, the author; and second, that the other may know something one doesn't. As the reader, I should realize that I don't create the text (in fact, in some important sense, the text creates me). Now, if I read with these assumptions, I may learn something. But reading with the assumptions of deconstruction only encourages solipsism and the vainest self-promotion.

Strange to say in this kinder, gentler culture, this culture of the feminine, reading has become aggressive. Interpretation has gone from the search for understanding to textual rapine. No level of presumption on the part of the reader is disallowed; conversely, it is encouraged. It has been assumed, I suppose, that this tactic will encourage new ideas. A few new ideas, of a bastardized and low sort, have erupted. But, for the most part, and more importantly, it has discouraged any sort of old-fashioned love for literature or art. It has discouraged respect for the past, for those who have provided, and continue

to provide, our artistic inheritance. And it has encouraged resentment from those who can read and view toward those who can write and paint and sculpt.

Bloom mentions Nietzsche as support for his theory of art as agon. But Nietzsche's theory was that of an agon between works of art. It had nothing to do with criticism or theory—with making the theorist an agonist through the door of interpretation. A poem, in its psychic intent, could be seen in part as an answer to a previous poem or a poetic heritage. The poet's use of convention was not only as a device of poetics but as an artistically meaningful emotional carrier, part of this emotion being antagonism to other poets. But for this agon to take place required for Nietzsche the creation of art. A poem is answered by a poem, not by a critique. A poet tropes his enemy in a poem. If he is not capable of a poem, he cannot take the field.

Nietzsche believed in other agons, assuredly, but he would not have styled them as artistic or poetic agons. There was the agon of artist to artist. And then there was the agon of philosopher to philosopher. In one, synthesis answered synthesis. In the other, analysis answered analysis. But one would never analyze a poem in order to answer it, any more than one would write a poem to answer a critique. When Nietzsche attacked Wagner, for instance, he did not try to reinterpret Wagner by a "strong reading," by denying him precedence or existence as creator, or by denying that Wagner's stated intentions had meaning or import. Remember, it took ten years for Nietzsche to *understand* Wagner. Nietzsche saw himself as a scientist. He could never have believed in the indeterminacy of meaning, or the relativity of response. For him Wagner's will was as definite and as real as anything can be. And so he attacked Wagner in strictly classical terms. He attacked his theories and the cultural manifestations of his theories and his music. And if he attacked him personally, this is only another classical agon, one that may be countered in the open, or fist to fist. Besides, it was always clear with Nietzsche that a polemic was a polemic. He never couched eristic terms in a context of literary "interpretation." A purposeful misreading would have seemed nonsensical. Nietzsche wanted to forcefully disagree with what Wagner actually was doing, not redefine what Wagner was doing to suit his own purposes. To misread Wagner would have been to deprive Nietzsche of an enemy.

Bloom smilingly dismisses Deconstruction's destruction of "authorship" as nihilistic but faddish (and therefore benign). He is not a part of Theory as Lacan or de Man or Derrida is. But his stance on interpretation amounts to much the same thing, without the honesty. Theory (i.e. Deconstruction) makes no bones about its Duchampian campaign against the artist. Bloom, though, has written monographs on every great man in history, and so cannot afford to destroy greatness altogether—or one would think. But to the careful reader his motives are as transparent as anyone's. He says:

"Many critics flee to philosophy or linguistics [for interpretive rules], but the result is that they learn to interpret poems as philosophy or as linguistics. Philosophy may flaunt its rigors but its agon with poetry is an ancient one, and will never end."

But Bloom's theory of poetry as an agon is the interpretation of poetry as criticism. A critique is much more clearly and one-dimensionally an agon than a poem is. A poet would never see a poem as strictly or primarily as an agon. And this is not because a poet is unaware of his own medium. It is because a poet, like a painter, sees the essence of his work not in analysis or interpretation, but in non-linguistic

revelation. Ineffable synthesis. Bloom's emphasis on the poem as agon only benefits him. The strong reader he is always talking about becomes, by his definition, the reader as critic. And criticism's agon with poetry and art is just as ancient as philosophy's—and is now much more an onus on art and poetry than philosophy ever was.

Bloom quotes Wallace Stevens as proof that it is still "a world of words to the end of it." But it is simply not a world of words, except for those who define themselves exclusively by words. For Bloom it *is* a world of words, and that is why, artistically, he misses so much of import in the world. Poetry's essence, like painting's or music's, is not words, but emotion. The absurdity of calling music a "world of words" is clear. Music is not even "a world of notes." Such a definition is only an empty truism. Likewise, poetry as "a world of words" is verbiage: the quote implies content, leading the reader in a preconceived direction, but ultimately has neither content nor direction (a symptom of most post-structural dialogue). Poetry and painting have always been closer to music than to criticism or philosophy. Painting is, or should be, even less verbal than poetry. Why have we accepted the analytical writer's co-option of poetry, and of painting and sculpture?

Why so many critics and so few artists? The poets and novelists and visual artists will not interpret their works for us not because there has been some division of labor, because a contract has been signed or a covenant revealed, but because, for the artist, interpretation is not just superfluous, it is ruinous. Art reveals exactly to the extent that the artist desired, no less and no more. More explication can exist only at the expense of the art. But the audience of art ignores this, and is drawn to ever more absurd circles of exegesis. Why? Arthur Danto, *The Nation's* art critic, explains it perfectly: "Until one tries to write about it, the work of art remains a sort of aesthetic blur." Only for the artist, and for that rare viewer who can feel, is the aesthetic experience primary, actually more powerful than its verbal retelling. All the others, the all-too-many, must make do with the agon between non-artist and non-artist.

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Critics have also invented and perpetuated the usefulness of the idea of "critical distance." From the writings of Walter Benjamin and Erwin Panofsky in the thirties up to now, criticism has been obsessed with the proper separation between artwork and viewer. For instance, it is often repeated that the corrupted modern viewer (understood as the non-critical bourgeois), agape before the spectacles of contemporary culture—film, advertising, etc.—has no proper distance from this "art." As Benjamin said, "Now things press too closely on human society."

But while it is true that "things" press too closely on human society, I do not think that art is one of them. The Amish are not wrong that contemporary culture is a barrage of inessential demands on ones resources, but this has nothing at all to do with art. Advertising is not art. Film rarely is. The bourgeois and the rest of us are inundated with static—worse than static, spiritual noise. Art we rarely encounter. And, armed with the false notion of critical distance, we do not know how to absorb art when we see it.



Contrary to the beliefs of the critics, the proper critical distance for art is zero. An emotional response to an artwork requires the suspension of analysis, both on the part of the artist and of the viewer. All critical guards must be let down; all schemata must be suppressed. The work must be taken on its own terms. To approach an artwork as a critic is to necessarily nullify, by an a priori method, its artistic impact. Malraux and Coomaraswamy understood this, but very few other non-artists have. Critical distance is useful if one wants to use a work of art to further a particular analysis. It is of no use whatever if one wants to be transported through the eye of the artist.

We have reached a topsy-turvy state, a Swiftian world where advertising is unquestioned but art is met in full philosophical armor. We are like knights-errant, kneecaps and elbows double-shielded, belly and genitals in the breeze. And the artist is as poorly arrayed as the art maven. Robert Hughes has written,

“A cloud of uneasy knowingness has settled on American painting and sculpture. Its mark is a helpless skepticism about the very idea of deep engagement between art and life: a fear that to seek authentic feeling is to display naivete, to abandon ones jealously hoarded "criticality" as an artist.”

Even our artists are now critics, mistaking "statements" and found objects and art historical "responses" for art. But art and criticism are not brethren, much less equivalent. Analysis and synthesis are like matter and antimatter, dangerous opposite poles that must be placed in proper longitudinal arcs from each other to keep from mutual cancellation. It may be possible to construct a positive art theory, for instance, but it must never precede or obstruct the primary line of sight from art to eye and eye to art.

Duchamp's notion that a piece of trash shares theoretical ground with the *David*, or Warhol's notion that the similarities between advertising and art are more important or interesting than their differences, are obstructions to art. These ideas would be obstructions even were they more true than false (which they are not) because no idea of art has a place in an artist's expression. Art is the transcendence of convention and technique and theory. These are tools. They are means, never ends. A Chopin nocturne is not enriched by asking formal questions of it, by dismantling the piano and psychoanalyzing Frederic. Painting and sculpture must again be left alone if any work is to get done.

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Of course, the avant garde of literary criticism is now far beyond the presumptions of Bloom. Those adherents to the French school continue to find any excuse to make art ancillary to social criticism. Kant and Hume and Berkeley allow for the dismissal of the text as a phenomenon—logically unattachable to any noumenon, and therefore adrift—the equal-time tool of any solipsistic soul. Sartre perpetuates this duality, as Essence and Existence, but arbitrarily defines "Essence" as "Nothingness," giving the critics their arbitrary but prestigious pessimism. Heisenberg and Einstein and Bohr are misread as an excuse for "Uncertainty" and "Relativity." Entropy is misunderstood to the same end. Dilthey and Foucault and Rorty place the critics, as they see it, not only in isolated psyches, but in isolated psyches in isolated cultures: artifacts of other places and other times can only be palimpsests to be retroped and hypertexted. Even Behaviorism is brought into play, as proof that art can be understood only as a social action, decipherable only by a viewer and therefore, as far as the artist is concerned,

psychically indeterminate. And Nietzsche is quoted to authorize every reversal, despite the fact that he despised any dualism, and therefore any solipsism, phenomenism, or existentialism. Sartre's "nausea" would have been dismissed by Nietzsche as nothing more than creative impotence. But for every critic, a poem or painting has become like that rock picked up on the beach. Afraid of its "somethingness," the critic courageously asserts its "nothingness," freeing his upcoming description of it from all comparison.

Likewise Lacan presupposes a dualism that Freud dismissed, and yet he is seen to be the great modernizer of psychoanalysis. One of Lacan's most influential theories of art, that of "trauma," only appears to add to our understanding of the artist's psychology. Stripped of its purposely convoluted terminology, the theory states that art may be created to replace an experience the artist finds painful. Art is apotropaic. But the idea that the artist recreates the world based on his desires is hardly revolutionary. It only appears to be when it is couched in multiple tropes and odd Heideggerian usage. For instance, Lacan defines the traumatic as "a missed opportunity with the real." That one word, "real," betrays the dualism that allows him much of the sloppiness in his language. Lacan gave his seminars the appearance of depth by implying that trauma is more than the pain of the unrealized: it is the pain of the *unrealizable*. That is, it is the inability of the subject to ever know the object. And this return to the subject/object duality that Nietzsche and Freud rejected allows Lacan to invent many other pseudo-spiritual, Jungian terms, such as "the gaze." The gaze is Lacan's term for the *object's* view of the subject. Lacan's anecdotal sardine can floating in the water seems to look at him "at the level of the point of light, the point at which everything that looks at [him] is situated." Lacan uses this expression to explain the subject's unease in a world of unmediated objects. Psychologically it explains the psyche's need to control the images it receives. Art is a taming of the gaze, a *dompte-regard*.

But the imprecision of Lacan's language allows him to say so much more without the immediate recognition of contradiction. The gaze, for Lacan, becomes not just anecdotal, but active, when the subject protects itself from the gaze, and when this protection is seen as inauthentic or, later, fascistic. Lacan analyzes the fascistic male as a creator of schemes (of representation) to control a threatening world, a sign of his impotence in the face of the "real." But Lacan is mixing his theories here: objects can be active and threatening only when they are real and knowable; conversely, protection can be inauthentic only when objects are unreal and unknowable—inauthenticity is the subjective self's self-ignorance. If objects exist, they must be mediated, by women as well as men. In this case, control cannot be "inauthentic;" it can only be reasonable or unreasonable. On the other hand, if men are inauthentic in their representations, then authenticity must be understood in terms of subjectivity, a subjectivity that should refrain from speaking of an active gaze. The gaze, mediated by the subject, becomes a schemata of representation, a series of phenomena. A subject cannot protect itself from the gaze directly, because the gaze is unknowable. This is why the subject is supposedly traumatized—from the object's "nothingness" or its complete "otherness." But, I ask, if the object, as noumenon, is unknown, why assume its malignancy, its power to harm? And why, once it is assumed to be malignant, would the subject assume that there is any protection, or that one method of protection is to be preferred to any other? There is no grid, no platform, for judgment until the subject has turned noumena into phenomena through his screen of representation. Once he has done that, why should a subject fear his own schemata, his own screen? What sense does it make to speak of a subject

traumatized by his own screen?

Nietzsche or Freud (or even Jung) would explain this sort of trauma not in terms of a mixture of a Manichean epistemology and a subjectivist psychology, as Lacan does, where noumena are mutually toxic (but otherwise unknowable), instigating the reactions of the male ego or of capitalism. They would see it as a neurosis, the misplaced psychic dis-ease caused by improperly assimilated experiences. That is to say, whether the individual sees experience as objective or subjective, phenomena or noumena, is of no concern. Trauma is not caused by a malevolent gaze or by subjective inauthenticity. It is a mistaken ordering of experience which, when oft repeated, may become a generalized fear of "the world," however that may be defined. What would be interesting to Freud or Nietzsche is not that the gaze is threatening, but that Lacan perceives it as threatening. What is interesting is not that the being of a rock is nothing, but that Sartre should think that it is.

The imprecise language of this sort of dualistic psychoanalysis also opens the door to the facile retroping by those social critics who take Lacan as a mentor. In some feminist criticism, for instance, Lacan's gaze is redefined as the male gaze, and the dangers Lacan finds in the malificent object are transferred to the malificent male. The male, for himself, is the paranoid, fascistic subject, warding off the "gaze" of the noumenon. But the male, for the female, is the gazing, violent object—unknowable but toxic—the predator that must be psychologically, and not just psychologically, negotiated.

All this goes to say that the artist is caught in an ever more complex maze of analysis, with the critic as minotaur. The rebirth of dualism and of a neo-Kantian complexity of language allows more people to say more things about a subject they know only abstractly, and to do so with little fear of classical refutation—since such refutation is now stylistically and politically passe. There is no possible way to attack poststructuralism on its own ground, because it has no ground. The ground is, after all, a structure. An attack, especially from a white male, can be dismissed as necessarily phallogocentric—from the aggressive and armored subject. Avant garde theory defends itself not through cogent argument, but by predefining its attacker as a confused monad, the pathetic dupe of larger forces, forces that only Theory can comprehend. And the argument is not multilateral, as one would expect of multiculturalists, but only bilateral. Anyone who paints objects as an aestheticist or who disagrees with the claims of Theory must be a defender of capital, patriarchy, and the Republican party. To the right of Robert Hughes there is no company but Hilton Kramer and Jesse Helms. That an artist might disagree with all the policies of his own government, might support Wendell Berry against the Farm Bureau, Noam Chomsky against the State Department, Dave Foreman against the Forest Service, Ralph Nader against GATT and NAFTA and Congress in general, Leonard Peltier against the FBI, and yet choose to paint non-critical art is unimaginable. Criticism has defined art as socially determinate and then has been good enough to determine what we should be socially. The categories have been marked off, and the most "original" artist is the one who fills his slot most completely.

Despite criticism's success, its theoretical underpinnings are slender as kitestrings. It does not know who to quote, who to support, who to attack. It lives off its own capital and fouls its own nest. Nietzsche was the defender of the artist, not the precursor and apologist of the critic. Bloom says that "any hypothesis is good enough for me," implying his own self-confidence in the face of competition. But the hypothesis of Deconstruction is simply not good enough for me, and it would not be good

enough for Nietzsche. Nietzsche would dismiss Deconstruction as theoretically arid in its potential for insight, and psychologically transparent in its motives, a pathetic modern symptom of resentment. The critic, a minor beast in Nietzsche's menagerie, could be no important beneficiary of creative freedom, because he is not a creator. Whether a reviewer of art or literature could or could not invent a novel theory is of no concern, except insofar as it begins to effect the artist. The destruction of a thing of beauty for the aggrandizement of Theory would have been the *ne plus bas* for Nietzsche. As he said in the *Genealogy of Morals*:

“Nature, which gave the bull his horns and the lion his chasm odonton [his mouthful of teeth], why did nature give me my foot?...To kick, Holy Anacreon! and not only for running away; for kicking to pieces these rotten armchairs, this cowardly contemplativeness, this lascivious historical eunuchism, this flirting with aesthetic ideals, this justice-tartuffery of impotence.”

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The analytical writer has usurped visual art in the 20th century for his own purposes (and for those of his accomplices in administration). His methods have been many, but I will discuss only the three most influential here. The first is his almost unilateral use of the (mass) media. Artists avoid the media because it cannot translate the subtleties of art. Pictures of paintings or sculpture, whether in print, or on TV or on the computer screen, lose all their artistic qualities—immediacy, tangibility, subtlety, rarity, intimacy, individuality—and so are avoided by artists whose primary concern is not marketing, but expression. Serious painters avoid prints for the same reason (a "lithograph" of a painting is no more a work of art than a lithograph of a sculpture is). Likewise, artists avoid "art interpretation" in the media because they do not believe in it. Art requires no left-brain interference of any kind. But art writers and analysts have used all the media to full effect. Artists have not been able to maintain control of theory in their own field, because theory is language, and language has been monopolized by those in the media. The number of words written about art by non-artists everyday is staggering, and artists have simply been overwhelmed.

In support of his newly created position as Puppeteer to the Arts, the critic has offered an ever-increasing slate of theories. These two seem to me to be the most pervasive and the least questioned: First, the historical confusion of aestheticism and formalism. The art critic or historian explains the movement from Manet to Warhol as a purifying interest in formalism. Manet, Courbet, the Impressionists and Post-Impressionists, and especially my man Whistler are all cited as precursors of formalism. But the theorists purposely blur the distinction between Manet's formalism and Warhol's. By a modern definition, Manet and Whistler were no more formalists than van Gogh was. They were all aestheticists. Art-for-the-sake-of-art meant for them not art-for-the-sake-of-art-theory, but art-for-the-sake-of-expression. Formalism is analytic; aestheticism is synthetic. With formalism, formal clues lead the viewer to theories or ideas. In aestheticism, the form itself, as a whole, causes emotion. Whistler wanted to jettison religious, moral, didactic, and literary content from painting. This did not mean that he wanted to empty painting of all content. For him, Modern formalism would be like emphasizing the keys of a piano, rather than the music emanating from it. Cognitive content in art is

peripheral: lose it all and there remains the music—this is what the critics have missed. The truth is that formalism has no pre-Modern ancestors who were artists. Formalism was invented by art analysts to serve their own purposes, and fools like Warhol played to the tune they piped. Art as expression needs no middleman, but art defined as art theory requires the theorist. Like a priest, the critic invents a problem only he can solve; and art still awaits its Luther.

The second theory concerns the impetus for art. Writers first emptied art of all traditional content by preaching formalism. Once the container was empty, it needed to be refilled. Refilled with ideas, of course, for only these could be argued about by non-artists. Ideas of theory, political ideas, ideas of psychology and sociology and science, even, *mirabile dictu*, ideas of economics. As an excuse for this, they pointed to works of the past. Was not van Gogh psychologically rich, did not the *David* have political implications for Florence, was not Leonardo a scientist? And so on, blurring another distinction and further confusing the bewildered. For there is an essential difference between art's implications and its impetus. A work, for instance, may have political implications despite the fact that political ideas had nothing to do with its creation. Why did Michelangelo create the *David*, for instance? Where does its power come from? Did he create it as a political statement? The Florentine Signory in 1505 may have seen it as such, but this was not Michelangelo's inspiration, nor has history understood it to be. *David* as we see him today in the Academia springs directly from Michelangelo's Id, untranslatable by words or politics or science or theory. Michelangelo is great because his art reveals him personally, beyond the banal concerns of his client or his subject. The force of his will and his desire define his works; one does not think in front of such art, one deliquesces.

Art may have political implications, but politics cannot be the inspiration for art because politics is a social, not a personal phenomenon. The reception of art is social; the creation of art is private. Political motivation does not arise at a psychological depth required for art. Likewise, a work of art may be placed in a theory, after the fact; but it cannot arise from theory because theoretical musings do not originate in that vast, often unconscious, part of the mind that predates linguistics—and that is the source of all art. Political ideas and art theories are cognitive, or rational, if you will. Art is not. The critic suffers from the pandemic Modern misconception that the Id is now subordinate to the Superego, or that the neocortex now controls the brain. But the artist, no matter how rational, knows that all language, all theory, all intellection is but a template, a tool of the Self, or of the Will, or of the Spirit. Synthesis precedes analysis, as passion precedes reason, as the limbic system (and the rest of the inner brain) precedes the cortex.

The Moderns may argue that art can evolve from ideas: it *has been*, since Kandinsky. But I say this is a degraded definition of art. We simply do not need art as another tool of the hyper-rational left-brain and Superego. Subsuming art within language and cognition is a bad idea. It overbalances Reason and puts the passions in a defensive position, with no natural outlet. It puts the instincts in an even worse position than religion has allowed. Trading the controls of passion from religion to a hyper-linguistic Theory is to increase repression, not decrease it. Religion, for all its moralizing, has always remained irrational. This is why art has flourished within religion. Art and Christianity have seemed like strange bedfellows to many, but they aren't nearly as perverse as art and Theory. Art can exist as a cohort of myth, but it can never survive as a subset to language or science.

Art has burned out at the end of the 20th century not through some Marxist historical necessity. It is not, directly, a victim of science or democracy or even economics. It is a victim of a coup. In grade school, as I scribbled my rough portraits of my friends and lampooned the teacher, there were two reactions from those who gathered around to peer over my shoulder. There were those who said, "Look, that's Jemmy!" or "Ha-ha, Mrs. Parkes is naked." And then there were those who said, "I wish I could do that." I was once flattered by the latter reaction, but I now see that the former were my true allies. For the envious ones went on to art history degrees, and they now tell people where to circle and for how long. And I am not so much a bother to them.



# The Art of the Last Man



by Miles Mathis

*In a recent New Yorker article Louis Menand cites a poll on the definition of art and shares the answer given by several well-known people "in the arts" (curators and critics, but no artists). The consensus is that everything is art. This poll is used to confirm what Mr. Menand calls "pluralism," an art theory of all-inclusion. Mr. Menand subtly undercuts some of the assumptions of this theory, but like all printable journalists in this age of "fairness" he does not strongly advance his opinion, or any opinion. He makes a few observations: leaving us to our own greater wisdom, one supposes.*

I might have passed over this article, in the sagacious silence we have all adopted toward art, had he not quoted Robert Rosenblum, the curator at the Guggenheim. Rosenblum said this: "By now the idea of defining art is so remote I don't think anyone would dare to do it." I considered what this might mean. We have apparently become so afraid of dogma that we have put the discussion of a whole field of enterprise off-limits. We are allowed to say "I like it," or "I don't like it." But to become personally interested in art to the extent of making judgments is now considered not just presumptuous, but regressive, atavistic. What kind of humunculi and homunculae have we become?

Of course the discussion is not really being closed to prevent dogma or guarantee progress, although that is what we are meant to think. "Tolerance" is simply the current pseudo-political shibboleth disguising job-protection. What Rosenblum is really saying is this: "Art Moderne is so entrenched, its definition so useful to so many people, from curators and gallery owners to critics and magazine editors, from MFA candidates and college faculty to art historians and book publishers, that it is now absurdly quixotic for anyone who aspires to any position in the arts to even open his mouth. It is professional suicide. The opposition has been successfully and completely predefined as intellectually inferior, emotionally unrealized, and politically recidivistic. Only a beserker would attack now."

Well, I suppose artists have always been madmen. They do not weigh the costs very well. Van Gogh said,

But what is it to me whether my chance is slight or great? I mean, must I consider this when I love? No —no reckoning; one loves because one loves. Then we keep our heads clear, and do not cloud our minds, nor do we hide our feelings, nor smother the fire and light, but simply say, "Thank God I love."

Foolish sentimentalism in this day and age, perhaps. Still, I think I will take his side. I will take Rosenblum's "dare." I will offer a definition of art. Not as a final pronouncement, but as a re-entry into the historical dialogue of artists. I am not afraid of an argument. Nor am I afraid of offending the avant garde, the institutionalization of offense. Modernism, which boasts of rising on the ashes of the past, should not be so easily burned.

Nietzsche called the human product of cultural decadence "the last man." The victim of an atrophied will, this psychological resultant of an all-engulfing egalite would be incapable of art or polemic. The last man would demur, and blink.

Pluralism is the art of the last man. Creativity, like all else, has been subsumed within *fraternite*, and no one would now be so cruel as to deny that his brother is also an artist. Art is everything. And nothing. The only sin is pride, the mistake of eminence. And the discussion of art has followed the example of art itself. Those in the arts have become droopy-eyed cynics, who, like Bartleby, "prefer not to." In this soporific milieu, beneath the opiate-umbra of Modernism, it has already been made it clear what may be art and what may not be art in the future, so that those on the inside would only be harming themselves by any dissention; and those on the outside—that is, the public—must be kept in a constant *laissez-faire* posture, for their disinterest suits Modernism just fine. If everyone can be kept sleeping for just a while longer, the Cheshire Cat will be nothing but grin, and only criticism will know the joke.

But once, quoth the Hyperborean, the spoiler of festivals, art was one thing and not another. There was both the signifier and the signified. Once, when the Muse still rose from the belly of the sea to anoint her lovers, to breathe salt-kisses into the mouths of the dreaming, the traveler kept a log—he knew where he had been. The *artist* defined art. He did not pause to consult committees or curators. He did not wait for a hearty thumbs-up from those on shore. He fortified a precise position, not as an advocate but as a believer, because it was his, and began building the most lofty structure that might bear its own weight. As Nietzsche said,

This is my good. This I love. It pleases me wholly. Thus alone do I want the good. I do not want it as divine law; I do not want it as human statute and need; it shall not be a signpost for me to over-earths and paradises. It is an earthly virtue I love: there is little prudence in it, and least of all the reason of all men.

In Nietzsche's time it was considered a sign of health for a field to have high levels of contention and disagreement, protagonists and antagonists going at each other in high emotion. Then, strong attachment was not necessarily a sign of intolerance or ignorance, but might be a sign of intimacy, of privacy or perception. Now, assurance is allowed only on the radio, never in the upper reaches of scholarship. The "Olympian malice" of a Goethe now defines the buffoon, never the genius. But was philosophy healthier, more productive, when Hegel was going after Kant, and Schopenhauer going after both, and Nietzsche pouncing on all, or is it healthier now, in the reign of the Nains, the tiny? Was

art healthier when Ingres and Delacroix were at each other's throats, and when Whistler and Courbet and Manet and Zola and Baudelaire were vying for laurels, or now, when art theory is taboo? Art cannot exist in a cultural and theoretical vacuum. Nor can it exist within a square ruled off by the insignificant. Pluralism is not a liberating, equal-opportunity advance in art-historical awareness. It is an enervating sign that no one gives a damn one way or the other. A thousand articles on "the end of art" don't seem to be leaving anyone in tears, as long as criticism survives. The game is self-perpetuating as long as something, anything, is being analyzed. Duchamp long ago proved that the object, and therefore the artist, is immaterial. Once we accept Brillo boxes or cows as interesting artifacts, we have thereby also eviscerated the creative impulse of the artist. When art has devolved to the level of a sixth-grade science project, or show-and-tell, one might as well play chess.

Mr. Menand makes the philosophical-sounding statement that "art is whatever people say it is." This is not an assertion, though, it is a truism. Meaning that, as an argument, it says nothing. It is polemically neutral. Of course art is whatever people say it is. The question is "what is art when people refuse to say what art is?" Or, to put it another way, "what does it mean for a culture when that culture, by default, says everything is art?" I maintain that it means the culture is approaching Last Manhood. Scientifically and Economically we still show some signs of life. We still demand that "physics" means something. We demand that "mathematics" means something. We demand that "money" means something. But our creative needs and our creative abilities seem to be devolving simultaneously. It is not surprising that some of us can't offer more interesting "creations" than cowheads: talent has never been distributed equally. What is disturbing is that the near-complete disappearance of high art has not caused an outcry. I define high art as the marriage of great skill and deep emotion. Our museums and our museum goers have not noticed, or find it relatively unimportant, that almost no 20th century artists have delivered, or even attempted, high art.

Many seem to retain some residual need for this old-fashioned sort of art. How else to explain the continued popularity of Michelangelo and Rodin, Bach and Mozart, Rembrandt and van Gogh? But as a people we seem satisfied with the death of that art. We watch the killing of the sacred cow with a detached bemusement. As if a dead cow will last forever. But Mr. Hirst has shown us that it is not so.

Robert Hughes has called art a "source of spiritual replenishment." Bach and van Gogh may be such sources, but Warhol and Hirst, Freud and Bacon cannot be. Warhol was purposefully a wellspring of nothing; and the others, although perhaps rich in content, are admittedly messengers of another sort.

But we, as the "people who say what art is," are not required to embrace the messenger just because he arrives with a package he has labelled art. I contend that we do more damage to ourselves and our culture by refusing to discriminate, than any damage we could possibly do through discrimination. I say that I not only have a right to my opinion on art beyond "I don't like it," I enrich art by finding it important enough to have a considered opinion on, and offering that opinion to the art-historical dialectic. I do not propose legislating or censoring any art. I propose arguing about art, artist to artist, because only automatons want a closed discussion, a final contract. I propose encouraging art that we choose to encourage. Making decisions based on our own desires and needs, as people have always done, and fine-tuning or changing those decisions as they become unworkable or indefensible.

I maintain that this is not being done. Robert Hughes occasionally draws the line with the antics of a Schnabel or a Finley, and I find his powers of deflation refreshing. But so much of 20th century art is sacred—not artistically convincing, but a brick in the theoretical wall—and therefore still hands-off, even for Hughes. It is not that I want Hughes to become a theorist: the last thing art needs is another Clement Greenberg. But artists need to attack contemporary art theory, not in snide pseudo-creative reactions to their 20th century precursors, but in admittedly ex post facto contextualizing of works they have created for their own artistic reasons. That is, first, artists need to relearn their craft and, dipping into their emotional wells—ignoring criticism and recent art history—again offer self-justifying artifacts. Then, once they have done this, they need to gain acceptance for these works by reinventing a modern theory to contain them and to defeat all standing theories—theories promulgated by critics, not artists.

The dialogue among artists was more interesting in the 19th century, when artists were their own theorists. Many conflicting opinions were advanced, opinions backed up by works, and artists were capable of both art and art criticism. Emile Zola, Charles Baudelaire, James Whistler, Leo Tolstoy, Auguste Rodin: all these creators also wrote important articles or books about art. Even then, the word tended to usurp the visual image (think of Tennyson's overbearing influence on the Pre-Raphaelites, or Baudelaire's illogical influence on painting). But I think it is much less destructive to have painting influenced by poetry than by criticism. Poetry and painting are both synthetic. They are closely related forms of creativity. But criticism is analytic, its methods just the opposite of inspiration. Criticism is born in the frontal lobes, circumscribed by language and reason. Poetry and painting arise in the Id, resonate from the limbic system, surrounded by dreams. In the 19th century, even when the theories were wrong, as in some of Baudelaire or Zola, they were wrong about art's necessary social implications, not about art's definition, art's impulse. Baudelaire and Zola, as fond as they were of theory, would never have thought of arguing that art arose from theory. Art remained primary; its uses and explication, secondary. The artist's analysis was preceded and informed by his synthesis, by his superior forms of creation, and these creations justified his position as theorist.

Now, though, theory is the source, the mother of all creations. Social criticism supplies the rubric and art supplies the examples. Art has become the last religion of social reformation, and the critic is its self-appointed priest. Art is now just a tool of agitprop, but this degraded role appears to shame no one. On the contrary, the contemporary artist revels in his own vulgarity, flaunts his artistic disabilities: he is already forgiven his sins to art by the casuistry of the critic/cardinal, flush with indulgences. He is convinced of his heroic status as dismantler of the machine of oppression.

And so the ends justify the meanness of modern art. The ends being, first, the extinction of talent as a concept in art, and second, the resulting freedom of all people to be creatively enfranchised in the remolding of the artworld. Art may never again be exclusive. It must always be inclusive. No one wants to admit, though, that this anti-hierarchical approach is finally childish and nihilistic, and that it has nothing to do with democracy. Democracy is about equal opportunity and fairness. By extension, it may also be about the logic of compassion and cooperation. But it is not about enforced sameness. It is not about blindness to differing abilities and to the need for the very-abled. We may pretend that

everyone is equally artistic, but I fail to see how this does anyone any good. The Getty Center and other powerful institutions lobby for art education that does not discriminate based on talent. How is this progressive, much less logical? The unartistic are not fooled by such patronizing: their inferiority complexes will rage on regardless. But the artistic thereby become pariahs. And no one, neither the masses, nor the intellectuals, nor the unartistic artists, gets to live with art. All of them must steal time with the old masters, sneaking a guilty peek under the covers as with a dirty magazine. That or let the soul continue to shrivel along with the genitals, and pass it off as historical necessity.

But eminence is not exclusionary, and to continue to pretend that it is, is simply invidious. Great art is a boon to all, not just to the great. As an example, what viewer does Michelangelo's *David* exclude? Those who truly love this sculpture love it not for its biblical theme or its place in the politics of Florence. It is loved for its beauty and grandeur. Only the truly troubled could find fault with such a work. If beauty and grandeur are to be stamped out because they oppress the pinched and homely, then we had better attack the clouds and the stars as well. The moon should be theoretically disabled; and everything sleek and healthy removed as an eyesore (it might be argued that we are near to doing all these things as well.) But the *David* excludes no viewer. Nor does it exclude any competitor. Less ambitious creations have always co-existed with the more ambitious, and no classical artist ever argued for the suppression of crafts, or the exclusionary right to self-expression. In fact, among the healthy, excellence has always been an encouragement to further achievement, of whatever level. Nietzsche called the "overman" the bridge by which future artists could cross over. Not a wall; a bridge. A high-water mark for the ambitious; not a ceiling looming over the puny. Clement Greenberg complained that the Renaissance masters, by virtue of their accomplishments, squelched future creativity. But this is the most ridiculous claim in the history of criticism. Every artist you could name for 400 years, from 1500 to 1900, was encouraged by the examples of the Renaissance, and entered the field from a love and respect for the works of the great artists of history. Did Rodin create the *Gates of Hell* and the *Burghers of Calais* because he was oppressed by Michelangelo and Ghiberti? To disdain, like Duchamp, the works of your ancestors because they are beyond you was once tantamount to announcing your own tininess, and was grounds for being permanently ignored. Now it is a sign of distinction. What other proof of lastmanhood is necessary?

Art is the creation of extraordinary artifacts; and definite abilities, innate and acquired, are necessary to the production of art. Abilities that are not universal. Abilities that are rare. To deny this is not to be progressive, it is to be evasive. To deny this is not a sign of tolerance or inclusion, it is a sign of envy. Or, as Nietzsche said, *ressentiment*.

Resentment, for Nietzsche, was the defining character of the decadent. Decadence is not (as we are told by the immodest lastpeople) the pseudo-glamour of sexual perversion or the "gothic" descendance into anti-style or the philosophic polymorphism of the esoterically confused or even the glittering neuroticism of the always newly-interesting. In this context it is simply the reaction to real achievement. Duchamp and Warhol are the epitomes of this attitude. I need not prove it here; they admitted it, revelled in it. Even Picasso, infinitely more talented than them, conceded in one of his moments of candor that he had simply accepted the degraded position of a "condemned" art and had

"satisfied the critics with all the many bizarre notions which have come into my head and the less they understood the more they admired them. . . . I am only the entertainer of a public which understands its age."

What Picasso understood was that decadence is the hallmark of 20th century art. Now, to the preternaturally pierced lastcult, decadence is imagined to be progressive, the key to the future. Even Camille Paglia, whom I otherwise admire, embraces decadence, preferring to be "of her time." One cannot be authentic unless one is au courant. To be healthy among the diseased is to lack sympathy. And of course it limits ones ability to become famous. But, one may point out, for destruction to be progressive requires a turnaround at some point. It requires rebuilding. Decadents, however, do not build. Healthy people build. Contemporary art and criticism are not qualified to rebuild because they are theoretically predetermined to analyze, to deconstruct, to "clear the way." Now, after all the lovely leveling and libel and scarification and tattooing, after the century of implosion, we must ask, "To clear the way for what?" It is pointless to continue strafing barren ground, bombing the surface of the moon. Criticism has proven in the last decade that it needs no grist to grind out its living: it can apparently exist on air, analyzing its own eyeballs ad infinitum. But artists must break the cycle or smother.

Criticism has cleared the way only for itself, for a reflexive, self-generating criticism that requires no art. One of the reasons that criticism has become so tame, so blasé, is that the big battles are deemed to have been won. It does not need to flinch because no one is attacking it. Critics like Greenberg so thoroughly overpowered all opposition that contemporary criticism need only coast. Modernism is so deep-dyed in the universities and journals that the enemy has nowhere to exist. Writers critical of 20th century art have been marginalized to the point of extinction. And artists simply do not publish. The artists of the avant garde do not need to, with allies in ink everywhere; and other artists cannot. *Southwest Art* and *American Artist* are no place to discuss theory. In part this is the fault of the artists, of course. Traditional art is at least as anemic as Modern art, and there are admittedly precious few who have anything to say beyond questions of technique. But this is equally true of the artists of the avant garde, who without the mountain of exegesis and PR elevating them would also appear below sea level.

The Maginot line in art right now is not between artists and the government or between artists and the masses. Pluralism is an invention not of the common man—who remains impressed by what he cannot do—but of the intellectual. The prestigious and lucrative field of art has fallen to invaders: those who want its protective umbra without having to create anything memorable or to be judged by meaningful standards. With the death of the humanities in our colleges, every liberal arts major flirts with criticism as one of the last available jobs, and every critic flirts with the idea of being an artist, making it in New York City. It is therefore no surprise that the analytical abilities of the intellectual now define art. The critic has remade the artist in his own image. Greenberg promotes Barnett Newman: who is the critical talent and who is the artistic talent? Who is creating what, or who is creating whom? Warhol's Brillo boxes: artifacts or examples of art theory? Who can tell? What real artist would give a damn? In the 19th century, the artists were also critics. In the 20th century, the critics are also artists. It is this closed circle that real artists must now circumnavigate, transcend.



Let visual art no longer be confused with social criticism, with journalism, with acting, with political activism. Art is not the handmaiden or the accomplice of any of these forms. Art is not a sub-category. It is a category of its own. Art is not criticism. Art is the opposite of criticism. Art is synthetic; it springs from the imagination. Its origins are pre-cognitive; its mechanism, ineffable; its consorts, symbol and myth. Criticism is analytic; its methods are rational. It meets art like matter meets anti-matter. Art is always arrayed in mystery; criticism cannot abide mystery. When criticism becomes more powerful than art, its methods begin to systematically destroy the foundations of art. Reason, continually watered, crowds out an etiolated imagination, and our dreams become desiccated. But for art to be healthy, synthesis must precede analysis, passion must precede cognition. Art must precede theory. Artists must regain control of art.

No one would argue that Michelangelo and van Gogh were not artists. Why does theory disallow such art now? Why do Modern forms exist to the exclusion of traditional forms? Or, to put it another way, why has *art moderne* spent such enormous amounts of energy distancing itself from *art pre-moderne*? It has nothing to do with teleology and everything to do with protectionism. Realism as decorative art, as cowboys and Indians and facile landscapes and still lifes, is no threat to Modernism: it is easily dismissed as bourgeois. But a powerfully expressive realism, a great painting or sculpture with real emotional content, is a threat to Modernism as a whole. It simultaneously undercuts Modern art's claims to equal achievement and criticism's *raison d'être*. *David* or *Starry Night* needs no verbal retelling or critical explication, requires no middleman, no priest. If a Michelangelo emerged today, Modernism would fall like a house of cards. But many walls have been built for just such an emergency. Goethe said,

Oh my dear friend, would you like to know why genius so rarely breaks its bonds, why it so seldom bursts upon us like a raging torrent to shatter our astounded souls? My friend, it is because of the sober gentlemen who reside on either side of the river, whose precious little summerhouses, tulip beds, and vegetable gardens would be ruined by it, and who know so well how to build dams and direct all such threatening danger in good time.

Criticism is not the encouragement of art, it is its discouragement. Criticism's replacement of emotion with cognition has effectively revolutionized art, and all expectations from it. Art of the old sort may be dismissed out of hand, regardless of quality or content, and this is just as Modernism wants it. Among all the political and careerist agendas of those in the arts, an artistic agenda, the very existence of art, is an intrusion. Like Dostoyevsky's Grand Inquisitor, the critic, professedly to "save" everyone concerned, must define art as the opposite of art. For him, art is pluralistic: that is, it may be everything but that which it is. It may be defined by politics, or novelty, or theory. It may make one think, it may be a puzzle, it may be gigantic, it may be random, it may "move to action," it may titillate or annoy, it may be purposely trite or decadent or banal. But it must never pretend to eminence or beauty or elevation or subtlety or depth. It should not be personal, nor should it be universal. It must not betray any positive virtues or the belief in any positive virtues, no matter how well-expressed. Above all it must not be well-expressed. How can it be elucidated by criticism if it is not already turbid?

I have approached the definition of art from several directions, describing it both positively and negatively, opening myself up on all points of the compass. The definition of "artist" follows from these. An artist, to my mind, is the opposite of the Modern artist. He does not listen to critics or curators, read *ARTnews*, psychoanalyze himself, or make political "statements." He does not need to. He does not find analyzing art more interesting than creating art, because he can create it. And because he needs no help creating it, he takes the presumptions of theory and theorists with an ill humor. Finally, an artist dares to do what he can do. If he can paint, he paints. If he can sculpt, he sculpts. If he can also argue, then he leaps out of his cave like a badger on a grizzly bear. Or like David on Goliath.

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## Bad Boy of the Latin Club



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*by Miles Mathis*

My biographer asked me to tell this story myself, since it is too silly to cast into the third person. She says it is silly but she wants me to tell it anyway. I know that many people think that the Latin Club is equivalent to the glee club or the Star Trek club, in terms of hipness, hopness, or any kind of coolness or badness. But I think I may at least claim that I am the only person ever to go to two National Conventions, win both of them, and be arrested at both. Whether I get any sort of extra credit for this, now or later in heaven or Hades, is yet to be seen.

In 1979 the Monterey High School Latin Club, population 7, took the train from Lubbock, Texas, to East Lansing, Michigan, for the Junior Classical League convention. For those who don't know (which would be just about everyone, I imagine) the Latin Conventions are a big deal. Well, they are a big deal for those who go to them anyway. Actually, the Latin conventions are bigger, nationally, than the French or Spanish conventions. Some states like Virginia and Tennessee (go figure) have hundreds of kids who show up, though most of them show up just to wear togas, write odes to Lesbia, and hope that an orgy will spontaneously erupt. Even Texas has (had?) a huge contingent. I remember that one high school, Baytown Lee (near Houston) had over 100 kids show up at the convention—and we 7 kicked their sorry butts.

Anyway, on the way to Michigan State University, the wacky Latin club decided to stop in Chicago to eat deep dish pizza and climb the Sears Tower. Which we did. However, no one else was nearly as

impressed by the view at the top (of the tower, not the pizza parlor, please keep up) as I was. After about five minutes they insisted we ride the elevator back down, to eat more pizza across the street, or something equally grand. Well, as they argued in the lobby about where to eat the next slice, I snuck back to the elevator. Unfortunately, it was 2 bucks to re-ascend, and I was broke. Noticing a stairwell nearby, I leapt into action, hardly pausing to fasten my cape. 110 stories later I stood outside the observation deck. *Outside* the observation deck, mind you, in the stairwell, which was locked from the outside. Next to the door on the wall was this sign: "No exit. All stairwell doors require a key. Please use the red phone to call for help." So that is what all those red phones (110 of them) were for. Obliging, I called a policeman to come arrest me. Which he did.

He took me into a little office and began questioning me. I emptied all my pockets. No weapons (he missed the *cultellus* I had stowed in my golden sandal, thank Jupiter). He asked me how I got there. I told him I thought that was the bathroom. He looked at me sideways, "So you just popped in there and couldn't get out?" I said yes. "From the deck?" Yes. "OK, well, catch up to your party. Where are they?" I think they are already on the elevator maybe. I don't see them. "OK, scoot!" he said as he pushed me onto the elevator.

I hid behind a big man in the elevator as other people got on, then, at the last moment I hit the "door open" button. The door jerked back open while ten more fat people got on, then I jumped out. By then the policeman had wandered off again. I went over to the glass wall and got my fill of Chicago and Lake Michigan and then leisurely rode the elevator down to the lobby, where my classmates were furious (the ones who didn't have their mouths full of pizza from across the street).

The next year I was a second-year student and vastly more mature. This time I only got arrested for pulling a fire alarm in the dorms at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. In my defense the telephones in the dorms had very weird rings, and no one rang us up, so I didn't know it was the phones. I thought everyone else was pulling the fire alarms, so I thought I would join the fun.

I spent literally two hours being questioned, but they couldn't think of more than one question. So they just asked me that over and over. "Who put you up to it? Someone else must be involved. It was a dare, right? Who was it? Who was it? Blah, blah, blah." I thought of tons of fun people to implicate, but finally just said, "I told you everything, there is nothing else to say. Unless you are going to force a false confession through torture, it is time to move on. Put me in jail or whatever." I actually said that. I have witnesses. The authorities' mouths all dropped and then they huddled. My teacher told them I had just won a fistful of awards (I suspect she also whispered that I was an idiot-savant off my meds or something). So they let me go.

And those are the true-life confessions of the black sheep, the *mala stirps*, of the Latin Club. Upon return to Lubbock, the club stripped me of my Miles Gloriosus club t-shirt and my *toga virilis*. At graduation they voted me most likely to do hard time for bad declension and illicit conjugation.

# LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

## PART I

*The Independent*, London, et al. March 18, 2003

I just saw the show at the Tate Britain, including Rodin's *Kiss* wrapped in string. But I must tell you I did not pay at the door to see the *Kiss* wrapped in string. Nor did I fly to London, braving the lines at security, to see the *Kiss* wrapped in string. I came to see the *Kiss*, period, sans string. If Rodin were alive today he could sue for copyright infringement. If I were a British citizen, I could sue for mismanagement of public treasures and public funds. What's next—paying "artists" to graffitti the *Rokeby Venus* and draw mustaches on the Rembrandts? We used to prosecute desecration, now we pay for it and promote it. If only the man with the shotgun had known the artistic value of his imaginings, he might have achieved real fame (and gotten a contract at Saatchi) for blowing a hole in the *Virgin and Child with St. Anne*. He only needed to line it up beforehand with the director. If there are any young artists, worthy of the name, still living in London, I encourage them to storm the Tate Britain with scissors, to reclaim their heritage.

Historical note: This letter was published in full on the date given above. A few weeks later a London artist was arrested for cutting the strings. His name was not released to the public and he was not charged—in order to avoid giving more attention to the act. It was not me, but I applaud the man and the act.

*Time Magazine*:  
(July 1994)

I am somewhat less than shocked to learn how well fenced in are the foolish in strong places still—as Mr. Hughes' commentaries on "art" have made clear—but I wonder whether there might not be other abodes, more wise though less publicized, and whether it is best to always get ones information from strong places.

As a dead man, and therefore the most objective of observers, I beg to point out that a section on art in a popular magazine in Modern America can only appeal to the perverse: in flight from the Demon of Dulness and his preposterous surroundings, your readers turn expectantly to the "art" pages—not to be charmed by the subtleties of art, but to be confirmed in the decline of Western Civilization, that glorious spectacle, and to wring their hands and cry, "Oh My! Whatever are we coming to?"

Mr. Hughes, in his review of B. Nauman, deflates the artist from "hero" to "social activist" to "nuisance." Regarding Mr. Nauman, this is nothing if not generous; but who reads and writes about a

nuisance except worse nuisances? You are all cell mates in the asylum watching the available entertainment.

I did not die yesterday: I know that my current *coup* in your capital city would be impossible were I living to face the terms of the current *litterateurs*. But as one now beyond the reach of the bewildered, may I remind them that the establishment, whether it was the Royal Academy in my time or the various Institutions of yours, has never created, or promoted, an artist and never will. If there is some residue of art, some unhatched egg of the Muse peeping under a pile of feathers in this ridiculous country of yours, you can be sure it is not incubating in the nest of any administrator, curator, academic, or "any pitiful critic whatever." This is what all your hours of Art History (see the martyrdom and ascendance of Vincent) were to have taught you.

Or perhaps I am wrong. Perhaps such promptings are now truly impertinent. Perhaps there is a silent agreement by all concerned that the entertainment value of "art as pathological symptom" cannot be equaled by any positive definition. If so, rejoice! The future will never bore you. "Go gentle into that good night."

Signed

*James McNeill Whistler* [with butterfly]

*Time Magazine:*

(July 1994)

Fated to be before my time always, I find that my missive of a week ago was a week premature [one week after the previous letter, Hughes published a review of the Whistler exhibition at the National Gallery in Washington, D.C.]. One would think the dead, especially when they are as charming as I, might be left to enjoy a few hours of deserved admiration without having to answer to the self-appointed purveyors of taste, but apparently Mr. Hughes (who is beginning to remind me of my own dear 'Arry, God rest his soul) thinks otherwise. I suppose I should be thankful I wasn't excoriated like Poor Julian or quartered like Fetching Miss Finley, but being classified "a good, but not a great painter" by a non-painter raises the specter of presumption, at least from where I am writing. I find I am just below Messieurs Degas and Manet, whose claims to greatness will be honored but not their artistic opinions. What matters that I am respected by fellow artists? The critics will sort all that out later.

Forgive me for reading so close to the page, but what, pray tell, was M. Degas' "range," his "breadth of human curiosity"? He was insular to the highest degree, and a genius. Or are we to dismiss Rembrandt, too, for not venturing beyond the Jewish Quarter, Raphael for painting those limited Madonnas, and Van Gogh for failing to address Metternichism. What sort of "formal toughness" did Manet exhibit? "Tough," gritty, yes. Formal, no, not by your definition or mine. Manet and Courbet were virulent anti-formalists, as am I~despite the claim that I wanted to empty the content from painting. I wanted to jettison the misplaced literary, religious, and political content; but replacing it with formalism, emphasizing color *as* color, or flatness *as* flatness, is absurd. It is like emphasizing the keys of a piano

instead of the music emanating from it. This is not "art for art's sake"; it is "art for the sake of art theory." Which explains why the critics and their darlings are so glad to perpetuate the misunderstanding. But what content is left? you ask, brows knitted. I cannot pour notes into the ears of a deaf man.

The implication here, which at least *I* did not miss, had nothing to do with formalism and everything to do with grit. Manliness. Modern mud-in-your-eye. Writing where he felt less constrained about such topics, Mr. Hughes has accused me of effeminacy. Oh, the lessons the Muse, that glorious female, might have taught him had he kept up his studies.

How does Whistler "look from here," he asks? Where is *here*? I answer. The burnt-out end of the century of the anti-artist, of the artist as sick man, of "the artist as nuisance." The "self-invented" artist gives way to the Greenberg-invented artist and the Boone-invented artist and the MOMA-invented artist. The well-read Australian with a limpid pen climbs into the pantheon of immortals with Ruskin, Bell, Fry, and Rosenberg. And let us not forget 'Arry.

Signed

*James McNeill Whistler* [with butterfly]

*Artnews*, February, 2003

Gentlemen,

Your article on me by Stephen May was fairly inoffensive, as such things currently go. But in the few places it veered from straight history to opinion, it still managed to rankle nonetheless. For example, as proof that I was a precursor of Picasso and Warhol, David Curry is quoted as saying of me, 'He packaged himself to stand out.' As if having a personality and manufacturing one were strictly equivalent. I know it is difficult for contemporary critics to understand, but there was a time when artists held opinions for artistic reasons, rather than economic ones; just as there was a time when people dressed in particular ways because they liked a particular style of clothing, for its own sake—a sort of *habitus gratia habitus*, if you will. Indeed, a closer reading of history might show that my personal tastes and decisions, as to style of argument and dress and presentation, did me little economic good. In fact, they caused me no end of hardship—decades of animosity and ignorance in the press, as well as bankruptcy and other fine feuding. The only occasional allies made were other artists, and it might be argued that this did me some good in my later years. But my outspokenness was never likely to win me friends in criticism or administration. Had Picasso or Warhol truly followed my example they would no doubt be currently unknown to you, criticism and administration having become the *raisons d'etre* of art. These fellows simply acted a part required of them—as they have admitted in print. 'Acting' and 'being' are not at all the same, you now see.

Signed,

James McNeill Whistler



with butterfly, sting, &c.

*The Nation:*

(March 1999)

Re: "Degas in Vegas." I suppose I should ask first *is Mr. Danto ill? Recent accident? Are we indulging him for some reason? Allowing him to E-mail his first draft and be printed without an edit? "Let's give him the cover, without any other banners, and 2500 words to babble about nothing. It's the least we can do for a dying man."* If so, the readers should be informed, so we can share in the compassion.

What is this article about? Is it an opinion piece? The only theme that runs through the whole article is the question of authenticity. After a full page of uninspiring and uninspired description, and loose analogies peppered with un-poignant satire, Danto finally asks it. But he never answers it except with the bald assertion, another 1000 words later, that they are "deeply authenticated." *Deeply?* Nice word choice. There is no substantiation, no list of sources, no attempt to share his verification process with us, assuming he had one. Who said they were authentic? Why should we believe them? If that is what this article is about, then let's have some proof. It would still be a boring article, but at least it would have a point.

In paragraph six, Danto devotes a sentence to the "legendary" art critic Dave Hickey. Who? Danto does not tell us. He gives us exactly one more sentence on Hickey after that, and it is unclear why Hickey is mentioned in either spot. Hickey teaches at UNLV. So there are other "artistic" interests in the city. What does this have to do with Bellagio? No one knows. Does Hickey teach criticism or art? If he teaches art, as is implied here, what are his credentials? This might have been an interesting subplot. But Danto does not go there, because Hickey was only mentioned to be mentioned. He is now legendary for his appearances in *The Nation*.

Also in paragraph six, Danto offers us, apropos of nothing, two parenthetical *sentences*, of 75 words, that make no sense at all. The differentiation of "Museum of Museums paintings" and "Museum of Museums painters" is convoluted, wordy, *and* gratuitous. I defy anyone to tell me what the analogy to Madame Tussaud's is about.

All this so that we can be told in the last paragraph, and apparently without irony, the "moral legend" (word choice) of the "*triste* truth" (word choice, by god) of Van Gogh's life: a fake painting by Vincent in Las Vegas would not be redemption for him, but a real painting is.

The Editor, *Forbes*, 1999

Re: "Unstarving Artists" [Oct. 11]. There is a similarity, sometimes, between what one is taught at

university in the school of business and in the school of psychology. It has to do with gains and losses. Who is winning, who is losing. For instance, rather than judge this article solely for its content, one may ask "What does Mr. Akasie have to gain by writing it? What does *Forbes* have to gain in publishing it?"

The intended loser here is clear: the non-avant garde artist. Why? One must suppose it is because Mr. Akasie prefers the avant garde. He mentions Kandinsky in his subtitle. He quotes a New York University art professor (who, as we all should know, is unlikely to favor pre-Modern art). And he makes realists look very bad. His prototype of a realist, the "artist" Mr. Kettleborough, doesn't even think much of himself, apparently. He does "Sargent rip-offs." He is "not Rauschenberg." He works for those tasteless, undereducated "yachtsmen," who blow five figures on mediocrity.

Sounds very cutting until one remembers that Damien Hirst, one of the darlings of the avant garde critics, who *does* think he is Rauschenberg, recently pocketed a half million for a real cowhead with live maggots. Until one remembers that Rauschenberg, who gets millions, is most famous for paste-ups of Kennedy and for stuffed chickens perching on assemblages of daily clutter. Until one remembers that Kandinsky, who painted colored triangles, was famous for talking about art (in his subtitle Mr. Akasie says that these unstarving artists could "probably talk rings" around Kandinsky: not likely, his articles being some of the most "important"—and often absurd—artist-created documents of art theory in the 20th century). The realists profiled in this article may indeed be "whorish," but their self-promotion skills are sub-collegiate compared to the agents, critics, and artists of the avant garde.

The New York critics know, for example, that the best offense remains a good defense: keep parroting how all the pre-Modern artists were "court painters," i.e. interior decorators, and eventually most people will believe it. Michelangelo's David?: just a "rip-off" of the Greeks to flatter Florentine politicians. Velasquez?: King Philip's pawn, nothing more. Rodin?: a propagandist for the State, no better than Hitler's agitprop artisans. If realism can be kept in the grave, all those "yachtsmen" who want the prestige of art will have to buy it from Mr. Akasie's approved avant outlets (at the appropriate 10X mark-up).

What does Mr. Akasie gain? An art that requires a literature. The university art history departments, now much larger than the art departments, need jobs for the graduates. The David needs no subtext. A maggot-filled skull does. What does *Forbes* gain? I can only guess that they have invested in Modern art. Or perhaps they are grateful for any chance to belittle Ted Turner and Prince Charles.

My gain with this reply? Because I love art, I detest both markets (modern and realist) and everyone in them. And I detest articles that hide more than they reveal, that attack an enemy but fake an objectivity, that snipe but offer no alternatives. My gain, everybody's gain, would be a report on great, unknown artists. But this sort of reporting, like creating real art, isn't so easy.

Paul Mattick, in his review of Jed Perl's new book *Eyewitness*, unwittingly confirms Perl's contention that critics are a large part of the problem of modern art. Perl also confirms this in his book, in ways he didn't intend. Both men are self-proclaimed experts in a field in which all their knowledge is abstract. Unless they are great artists, I can't imagine why anyone is interested in their opinions on art. I suppose someone must be published in this field that somehow remains provocative, despite the complete dearth of great artists, and these are the lucky ones.

The only points I could glean from Mattick's review are that he disagrees with Perl about Warhol and that he disdains Perl's claims to transcendence—since Perl has been a successful critic for years. Mattick seems to imply that anyone who is allowed into print by anyone is an insider. I realize that Mattick only had two columns to work with here, but he might have chosen a central thesis that did not look, at short notice, so much like envy.

Mattick accuses Perl of a "tin ear" that becomes a "tin eye," leading us to suppose that Mattick thinks he is the better writer, and therefore the better art viewer. And yet in his second paragraph he gives us the charming oxymoron, a "standard trope," which to my ear is so much braying. It reminds one of the verbal melodies of Arthur Danto. In his rush to use this lovely word, made somewhat less lovely by Harold Bloom's overuse of it (but, of course, this is why it is so popular), Mattick has forgotten to look it up. And then one must consider his forced analogy of Perl with Orrin Hatch near the end of the article: an analogy so tenuous and transparently political it must be considered *ad hominem*.

In the final analysis, the argument of art should not be about who is the best writer or the best viewer of art. Nor is art about who is the best self-promoter, the best purveyor of cool, or the best oiler of Boone or Saatchi or Gagosian. The question of art is who is the best creator. Mattick claims an understanding of the "art system" and its laws, an understanding that allows him to see why Perl has been left out of its upper echelons. But he apparently misses the even higher ground, from which I can see that a few years hence this whole art system will be a metaphysical relic, like to Reformation disquisitions on consubstantiation or the exact age of the earth. Whether you are the one who calculated that creation happened on 4004BC, or the one who spent years disproving it, you now appear more than a bit ridiculous. Likewise, anyone who misunderstands art to the extent of taking Duchamp or Warhol or Twombly seriously, either pro or con, is soon to be dismissed as an errant fool, no matter how wordy or learned.

The reason some writers and artists become famous now rather than others is not difficult to fathom. Mattick implies that they may deserve to be so. This sort of reasoning is on the level of those who claim that modern art is popular because the new Tate Modern in London is drawing a thousand people an hour. But as far as free entertainment goes, a dead circus elephant drew larger crowds a few years back, and public hangings once beat them all. And yet no one (but a modern critic) would call such things art.

*New York Times*, Arts section, Sunday, December 19 [1999].

Herbert Muschamp's endless rambling Trump tufthuntery made one fair point: "duende" (soul, let us say) is a good measure of architecture and other art. The "imps" (or the Muse) might indeed feel at home in the classical temple, not in Trump Tower. But also not, I say, in the dungeons of PoMo. Whether it be Koolhaas or Nouvel (among Muschamp's choices of the day), Gehry (perhaps the only name not dropped in the article), or Andreu (the *NYT* editors' choice of the day): "duendes [not] welcome here". These architects are doing a lot to impress many, but the imps are not among them.

Nor are they among those impressed by modern composers. Paul Griffiths, in his title, gives us "a promise of new sounds". Paul, we imps do not want new sounds. We want good sounds. Contemporary classical music (music's counterpart to avant garde painting—cf. white canvas to Cage's silent "piece") has failed so miserably because, while it is always possible to find here and there a person both soulless and rich enough to put non-art in his living room, it is difficult to fill any size auditorium of non-music with such gulls. I suggest that these musicians learn from their confreres in visual art. Rather than mass-producing the CD's, they should sell them as signed and limited editions. Or, even better, one-of-a-kind investments.

And Fred Tomaselli may have hazed the duende-impaired at the Whitney, but the imps again are elsewhere. He says, "I love being fooled." We do not, Fred. We love beauty. We'll send a postcard from the Mole Antonelliana.

*ARTnews*

September 2001

Concerning your articles on Sargent and Wyeth: each argument was a perfect example of the current engulfing of art by politics. Patricia Failing, echoing Trevor Fairbrother, tries to make Sargent "relevant" by outing him. Previously, Sargent was considered to be "slick, superficial, and antimodernist." Now simply by being gay he is suddenly "more complex and challenging." I have no reason for wishing Sargent straight; I hope he was "a frenzied bugger"—celibacy is the perversion, not sex. But fucking gondoliers does not make one a better painter. If it did, we would all be in Venice "taking lessons."

And Wyeth~pilloried by all the critics for seventy years for painting without their direction, mocked in the Big City for liking Helga the Aryan girl—now gets it right simply by changing subjects. "Look," say Betsy Wyeth and Mary Lynn Kotz, "Andrew is not so backward." The clear message: paint a white = regressive, paint a black = progressive. Wyeth has black friends: he must be a good artist. Now if he would just paint some black gondoliers he might achieve greatness.

Amanda Jones  
Editor-in-Chief  
*Antiques and Fine Art*  
1994

Dear Ms. Jones:

There are two things in your June issue I feel compelled to comment on. The first is the final paragraph of your Editor's Letter which states, a "greater number of artists to select from... creates a daunting task for museum directors, dealers and collectors~but, then again, they have no choice but to accept the clairvoyant challenge of directing our artistic future." Without getting into the "clairvoyancy" involved in such a challenge, I wonder to what extent museum directors, dealers and collectors "direct our artistic future," and how desirable this direction would be, were it proved. My feeling is that artists should have, and (amazingly) still do have, a greater influence on the direction art will take. And to the extent that these others (including also critics, agents and publishers) have co-opted this influence—and the extent is great, I will admit—art and art history have suffered.

Thoreau once said that "trade curses everything it touches." In the modern world it has touched, or grabbed, everything. For example, Wendell Berry has written convincingly of the corporate takeover of the farming "industry" and the near extinction of the farmer in favor of the agribusinessman. No doubt you have read of the many tragedies associated with this revolution, and no doubt you commiserate without seeing any close analogy to the matter at hand. But Berry's thesis is matched almost point for point in the world of art, and its effect can be seen in nearly every article and advertisement in your magazine and every other art magazine, whether geared to the artist or the collector: the artist, like the farmer, is nearly extinct. And not just by my definition. The artist who has been lionized by museum directors, dealers and collectors like no other in history, Vincent van Gogh, is respected by them (if respect is the word) for the very reason that he resisted all material and financial influence—and suffered horribly for that resistance. And yet we refuse to learn from the past. The pressure to pander to one art market or another is greater now than it has ever been, as is the presumption by non-artists, most of them businesspeople, that they have the right to "direct out artistic future." Almost without exception, the "artists" who are successful today, whether in the realistic market of the Southwest or the avant garde market of New York City, are ones who have recognized the primacy of marketing over talent and have benefitted from this priority. But the people who will influence future artists and therefore "our artistic future" are not the best-sellers of the day or their agents, but, as in the past, those who can combine an expressive natural talent with the depth and beauty of their ideas—those whose genius is in their works, not in their public relations.

My second concern in with the article on the Guggenheim. Reading about Thomas Krens gigantic (and gigantically expensive) vision, I began to realize just how pervasive Keynesian remedies have become in our society. If the national economy shows signs of contraction, the Feds force it to continue

expanding by spending more money. If the Modern art world shows signs of contraction (as it surely has) perhaps Mr. Krens and the Guggenheim Foundation can force it to continue expanding by spending more money. But, if all these museums do get built, the question remains, what is going to be put in them? Or should I say, "What art will be dwarfed by such potent architecture?" A museum after all is more than just a building. Mr. Krens seems to have gotten his cart before his horse. Most people already have a belly full of minimalism and such things from the existing Guggenheim, and would readily agree that the Frank Lloyd Wright building is "the collections most significant masterpiece," without thinking that high praise.

One feels equally sorry for the citizens of Massachusetts, who will watch 33 million of their tax dollars go for the purchase of 28 "industrial buildings." It freezes the blood to think that museums can now be made up of industrial buildings, although I have little doubt that the work planned for such a place will feel at home there.

Even more frightening is Frank Gehry's model for the museum in Bilbao—apparently a drive-thru museum on the off-ramp of an interstate highway. The city of Bilbao itself looks to be made of 80-foot walls of concrete, and this would seem a bit harsh until one recognizes the warm touch of several small trees so well tended their roots apparently do not need soil.

All this would be merely pathetic if Mr. Krens, Mr. Gehry, and others like them didn't have so much money backing them up. It is no coincidence that the former head of the American Stock Exchange is a board member of the Guggenheim. One would only be surprised if corporate America weren't behind such monstrous boondoggles. Our business leaders already spend their working hours in impersonal monoliths of concrete and asphalt: spending their off hours in the dungeons of Bilbao can hardly seem extraordinary.

One can only smile though at Clement Greenberg's antagonism toward the Guggenheim and its "megomania"—a case of the pot and the kettle if ever there was one. Greenberg has done as much to destroy art as anyone, both through his destructivist theories, such as that "subject matter and content become something to avoid like the plague," and through his belief in the importance of "historical criticism," which effectively put the critic in charge of the artist's agenda. If, in fact, Krens has nothing to put in his buildings, Greenberg should not be shy about taking credit.

Finally, I suggest, lest all our arts become antiques, those such as yourself, Ms. Jones, who avow a love for art, make a more concerted effort to find living artists whose work you enjoy. I know that it is easier to flip through the pages of the past to find a Cecilia Beaux or a George Bellows. But if you find contemporary art uninspiring (and it is, for reasons I've already mentioned) you need to look beyond the successful galleries and big-name artists. It really would have been visionary for a dealer or collector to have discovered van Gogh while he was still alive. For the same kind of people to deify him now that crucified him then is shameful, not least of all because it proves that they learned nothing from all their art history classes. Van Gogh was a difficult man, not one to be led around by dealers or

collectors. The lesson here seems to be that if those in the business of art really want art to flourish, and not just the business of art, they have to be generous enough to let those who can create, create. And stop this pernicious habit of backseat driving. Otherwise art will become like politics, and no one worthy of the field will want to enter it.

To the judges of the National Sculpture Competition, 2000 (including Bruno Lucchesi)  
Art Students League, New York:

I was in NYC for the contest. I saw the works in progress, I saw the finished works, I saw the model. I wish I could say I have never seen such a complete catastrophe in judging. But, unfortunately, I have. I have seen it over and over, in every contest my students or I have entered. Whether it is the OPA, the PSA, the NSS, NAWA, the ASOPA, Allied Artists, AAPL, the NWS, it doesn't matter. In each and every exhibition or competition, there are mediocre judges picking mediocre works that look like theirs for all the prizes. In many of them, the judges pick friends or students for prizes, and no one apparently finds this strange. This was perhaps as clear-cut an example of blindness and/or fraud, though, as I have seen.

I have to ask, why? I have it narrowed down to two possible reasons; but which it is, I really can't say. Is it that you honestly can't tell good work from bad? Have you become so insular, so blinded by your own narrow techniques and teaching methods, that you can't see anything that doesn't look like your own reflection? Your own work is clearly, and understandably, the limit of what you can do, artistically. Is it also the limit of what you can see? If so, you are not qualified to be a judge. You will never recognize work that is better than your own, and so you will never be able to encourage real talent. You will only continue to stroke your own ego by turning out inferior clones of yourselves.

Or is it something more? Is it that you can see it, but don't want to? You can't encourage work better than your own, because that would be cutting your own throat. Your position is too fragile to deal honestly with the work of others.

Or maybe (it finally dawns on me) you refuse to see it, because the outcome was predetermined from the beginning: it was your contest and the prize was meant for one of your own. Not for the best student, but for the best student from the organizers' schools. Got to keep that money in the family. If so, why not just say so next year? Why let in the guy from Texas? He hasn't got a chance anyway, and if he comes in and blows you all away, it just makes you feel bad. Twice. Once, because you realize your schools aren't worth a damn. Twice, because you have to cheat him to keep him from taking your money.

You think you can do whatever you want, but be assured that history will know. Like the Academicians who kept Whistler out of the Royal Academy or Rodin out of the Ecole, you will be remembered among the small and narrow. Your long-term reputations are effected by everything you do. Perhaps



you think you have no long-term reputations to worry about, and so you can scheme all you want. Undoubtedly you are right.

*Monsieur l'Ennemi:*

(Jonathan Bober, curator, HRC Barnes Collection, UT)

March 27, 1999

Please disregard my recent invitation [to my show]. You are hereby uninvited. It may be consolation to you to know, however, that you are now the winner of the First Annual Clement Greenberg Memorial Award, given by me to the most self-obsessed pharisee, the whitest sepulcher, in Austin. I am aware that there are many fine specimens back East, and that your chance of reaching real altitude, attaining star status, was low there. Perhaps that is why you chose Austin. Still, even here, the competition was stiff, not so much from quality as from quantity of candidates, especially in the arts. But all your hard work has paid off. Congratulations.

I am sure it is gratifying to all the slobbering dilettantes to know how many calories you eat each day, lest they lie awake at night in fear that you may expire, and with you so much vital information on the arts. How could I hold a brush or a chisel without knowing which painter of 17th century Genoa is now considered by the non-artist to be academic, and which inspired? And what will all those MFA candidates and PhD's in art history do without your words to parrot again and again, since there may be only "a half-dozen in the world" who can chirp so fine?

Eunuch of the Muses! Know Ye that the artist takes in all the necessary information through the eyes, and that the opinions of the crypt-crawlers and other "sages of the universities" is nought but effluent. Whether you have a thousand things to do tomorrow or nothing is of no interest to me, or any future artist. You will never create an interesting artifact. That is the bottom line.

Know Ye also that your existence is a bane to your own field. At a time when art is being sacrificed on the altar of political expedience, and the obsolescence of all the true virtues in painting goes on apace, you draw resources and scholarship to your own dissecting room, to compensate for your own disabilities. It is all too transparent, and too common—feigning an interest in art as the paradigm of careerism. But know that the ghosts of Michelangelo and Van Gogh look upon you, and they do not smile on your learning.

I suppose you are aware of Whistler's *The Gentle Art of Making Enemies*. This letter will be published in my own book, and history will know your true relationship to art. If you wish to further embarrass yourself, reply, and I will publish that, too.

American Society of Portrait Painters, Dec. 2000

I was embarrassed to be part of your competition and festival this year, which was little more than a crass, ill-conceived commentary on portraiture and an opportunity for poor judging. I will always remember these low points:

1) Richard Whitney's absurd comments about Whistler, an artist so far out of his league that any critique would be inappropriate.

2) John Howard Sanden's pathetic admission of powerlessness in the face of the client. It was all the more sad in that Mr. Sanden seems to be a genuinely modest and likable man (unlike Mr. Whitney). But the message Mr. Sanden sent young artists when he admitted to letting the client (and the portrait agency, no doubt) bully him into bowdlerizing his work was nonetheless a sobering and depressing one. If Mr. Sanden, a painter at the top of his field, cannot resist the pressures of the marketplace, what does that say about the chances of those below him?

3) Michael del Priore's bumbling attempt at an English accent at the awards dinner, to the astonishment of Richard Ormond. If there were any other well-bred persons there (which I began to doubt), they too must have cringed at such a mixture of fawning joviality and false superiority.

4) The non-attendance at Richard Schmid's award presentation. Another sign of the falseness of everyone concerned with modern portraiture—professing great admiration for Mr. Schmid, but caring only for their own careers and timetables.

5) Finalist Martin Hugg telling me (in a conversation I wish I never had) that Michelangelo's David was famous only because it was large. This I now take to be a good example of the level of understanding of art at the festival as a whole.

6) The choice of award winners. The entire festival was one long paean to Sargent, but when it came time to give the awards, there was no emphasis on brushwork or paint quality or color harmony or compositional ambition. This did not completely surprise me, in that most of the judges pay little attention to such things in their own work. I would like to know how the judges voted individually, so I will know where to place the blame; but their choices as a group were mystifying.

Yugi Wang was probably the most sinned against. I agree that his background was cluttered, but at least his compositional ambition was large. He had beautiful paint quality, lovely brushwork, incredible face and hands, and his sitter had a strong personality which he captured perfectly. Even though I did not "like" the painting (his choice of sitter and emotion did not appeal to me), it was still hands-down the best painting there. I would have been honored to get second to Mr. Wang this year.

Stephen Levin got the insider award this year, but I do not understand it. Surely everyone knows it is easier to paint small, and to paint a self-portrait. His paint handling was good, but the piece he entered was facile and narcissistic, not to mention contemptuous of the competition. That the other artists voted for him is only a sign of their bewilderment.

Zhang Li's portrait was technically solid but emotionally empty, a piece of glittering hackwork.

Henry Wingate's and Paul Delorenzo's works were smashingly unmemorable, and Jeff Bass' work was photorealism of the worst kind, probably projected and certainly painted with no brushes larger than a 2. The paint looked like it had been scrabbled on with a toothpick. It is a stretch to even call this painting.

I don't know what message the judges intended to send Mr. Wang and myself, but I imagine that we

got it. Obviously, I would not write a letter like this if I ever intended to have anything to do with your organization again. But I don't. I will leave you to your mediocre paintings, bloated egos, and dreams of financial success. If we all live long enough, you will hear of me again, though. Even after your festival, my idealism (and my independence) is intact. And my dreams are a bit more broad than yours.

Please circulate this letter to all the judges. And forward my request to the proper authority that I would like my painting removed from your website. I would like to burn this "bridge" properly.

*Austin American-Statesman*, Jan. 1999

Re: Dealer to the Dellionaires [i.e. people made wealthy via the Dell corporation]. I have worked with George Attal on and off for fifteen years, as one of his "promising" artists. I have nothing against George: he sold a number of my paintings, did a show for me, and treated me about as well as my other galleries. But the effusive tone of this article rang false to me, not so much for making George out to be an artworld saint, as for flattering his clients into thinking they have any taste or education in art, or desire to have it. It is not George's job to educate the world about art. It is his job to sell art, and he is very good at it. He gives his clients what they want. What they want, unfortunately, has very little to do with art. Sometimes it has to do with decoration, sometimes with a big name, sometimes with a big price. Rarely does it concern beauty, subtlety, elevation, or emotion. I am not slamming "kitsch" in favor of Modernism. I am attacking the whole market for art, antique to avant garde, which is driven by money. Evermore unrefined money.

I found the quoted dialogue especially grating. "See the line, how it rises gracefully..." "Oh, no, not thin naked ladies, not in my husband's office." Hah, Hah, Blah. Not everyone who claims to love art really does. We have always known this. But writing articles about "Dellionaires," making them appear interesting, is only pandering to their fenced-in vacuity, and exacerbating an already chronic problem in art.

*New York Times*:  
(November 21, 2003)

Michael Kimmelman drops many names in his article (11/21/03) on John Currin: Holbein, Durer, Houdon, Goya, Pontormo, Mantegna, Carracci, and Van Eyck, among others. And while it is true that Currin has stolen his compositions and poses from almost everyone (which used to be called lack of imagination, although Currin, we are assured, is a painter of great imagination) his paintings have nothing to do with any of these artists, neither in style nor content. Technically he may be marginally better than Hockney or Kitaj, but comparing Currin to Holbein is a cruel joke upon them both. Currin has more in common with Fischl, although he doesn't even achieve Fischl's nuancing—which is not meant as a compliment to Fischl. In thinking of the old masters, the following ideas come to mind: beauty, subtlety, depth, power, true emotion. Conversely, we are told that Currin excels in "cheap pathos", "vacant ritual images," and "fake sentiments." This is all meant by Kimmelman to be high

praise. It is high praise because Koons and Richter are also masters of banality and vulgarity, like Warhol and all the rest before them. Rich and famous guys, all.

The message is clear: the tenets and attitudes of Modernism are still very much alive, despite the supposed end of Postmodernism, the rise of Pluralism, and the resuscitation of Realism. Serious art is still out of fashion, and shallowness is still ascendant. What is required is transparent recombination coupled with an aloof pose. A plastic technique propped up by an imitation artist. An ersatz form representing an ersatz idea created by an ersatz person. The people who matter in NYC are still fascinated by the "vacuous and desperate", i.e. themselves. They gravitate to "intentionally bad painting" and "campy and debased subjects" since this leaves open the very real possibilities that they can hope to be subjects of well-known artists, or even the artists themselves (with the proper promotion).

Kimmelman says that "Currin seems to enjoy the mildly creepy, fetishistic absurdity of his anachronistic women." And why should he not? He lives in big-city modern America; who else is there? Like all the other contemporary painters who think holding a mirror to the public's pathetic self is artistically fascinating, Currin mimics its vulgarity, it squeals and cringes, and then it runs to buy more mascara and tighter pants. Of course art-as-pathology remains on top—to whom could art-as-subtlety-and-depth appeal to anymore? Where is the market? Poor librarians in Bangor or Bethesda don't drive the economy.

If Currin's content is fake emotion, barbed wit, and cheap pathos, then he obviously has more in common with someone like Bruce Nauman—yesterday's child—and his technique is really beside the point. Nauman and Hirst and countless others have proved that such content requires no technical mastery at all. *That* is why some people are confused by Currin: they wonder why he went to all that trouble, just to give us the same old cleverly empty basket. Kimmelman tells us that "Eyes in Mr. Currin's work tend to be black holes, sucking up light." And even more specifically, "Mary O'Connell's eyes, flat disks, are the emotional vortex of the picture." There is the contradiction that drives the mystery: how can vacuous eyes be an emotional vortex, how can art be driven by a theory in which vacuity and banality are positive virtues, and how can art history possibly be served by newspaper copy that offers up such theory as the *ne plus ultra* of culture, as fascinating fare for the educated and discerning reader?

# LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

## PART II

To the Editor, *Austin Chronicle*, 1994:

Last Thursday was the now annual AIDS "Day Without Art." This joining of forces of AIDS activism and Art leads a thinking person to wonder what exactly is the vital connection between the two. What exactly does Art have to do with curing diseases? Apparently Art has lost so much of its original agenda (has become unemployed, as it were, having no calendar or rolodex of its own to keep itself occupied) that it is now free to loan its exhausted prestige, its once good name, to any cause whatever, no matter how distant or unrelated. As far as causes go, the eradication of AIDS is a good one, but why is Art the hostage in this particular battle? Why not a day without Science or a day without Politics or a day without TV? Or even more apropos, a day without Sex? We could all wear little black codpieces for a day and refrain, as a nation, from touching eachother.

One suspects that Art is a hostage because it is a willing one, a flat-footed, ill-aiming soldier we can easily do without. It is the martyr with nothing to lose, the old drunk with no self-respect left, the pimple-faced urchin ready to run through enemy lines with a message from the top brass. A day without Science or TV would be death to us all; but a day without Art? Since when have any of us had a day with Art? Most of us, I daresay, are grateful to have this daily assault upon our eyes by what passes for art covered for 24 hours with black sheets and hefty bags, the hefty bags having a more subtle aesthetic effect, and we only ask that the draping be permanent. Where is the gallery or bank or restaurant where there is any art we would miss? These curators and eatery owners are putting on false airs to believe that we feel any pangs of loss, that this clumsy daubing, this color-field chicanery, this paint spilling and iron mongery is art, and therefore missable.

Those establishments with no free-standing or -hanging objets have, to be a part of the scene, covered their painted logos or arty signage. Where will it stop? Should we drape our cereal boxes and cover the screen saver? A day without Art in a decade or a century without Art loses much of its impact.

The truth is that Art has nothing to do with AIDS or any other activism, worthy or not; and until Art regains its own agenda, which is as little worldly as possible, it will continue to be the slut of each passing cause celebre, and will be only as missable as the pimp that promotes himself through it.

*Austin Chronicle*, December 16, 1994

I'm disappointed. I expected a more serious opposition. Did everyone but Hank Schwemmer understand that my first letter addressed not homosexuality or AIDS activism but the politicization of Art? Did everyone else agree with me about the tabetic state of Art, as a category, and the fault of politics, the use of Art as a tool, in this degeneration? I don't think so. From recent conversations on this theme I conclude that Hank's brilliant argument speaks for most: anyone not in lock-step with every decision of the activist leaders must be a homophobic rube, unable to understand the complexities of modern life.

I shouldn't have to spell things out, but for the sake of Hank—whose sub-collegiate polemics mistake personal attacks, based on absolutely nothing, for witty rebuttals—I will. First of all, I know the history of AIDS activism; I recognize what we are trying to do. I, too, have had friends die of AIDS, and I am not insensitive to the suffering, nor am I ignorant of the government's soulless inaction in the face of this tragedy. But, as an artist, I feel that throwing Art on the funeral pyre is a grievous error. There has been enough destruction already.

For we are not talking only about individual artists devoting time and energy to a cause they believe in—which is obviously a good thing. We are talking about an International Day without Art. Art, as a category, being used as a political tool. It is in this way that AIDS activism becomes part of an historical problem, a problem that has developed chronic or mortal symptoms only in this century: the co-option of Art by non-artists for every conceivable purpose—advertising, propaganda, therapy, among many others—has all but overwritten Art's original definition. In the mad rush to sell and convince and console we have forgotten that Art, when it really touches us, is never so worldly. There was a time when the artist was not a decorator or a salesman or an activist but, at his or her best, a sort of seer—someone who uncovered the beauty or depth or sublimity or relatedness most of us could not easily see. It almost goes without saying (it should go without saying) that this ability of the artist required not only an eye but also a craft through which to express these subtleties.

Now, though, that Art is Politics, is activism, now that being the big-hearted supporter of a worthy cause is enough to capture the title "artist," no matter how inexpressive the work may be, craft has been thrown out with the bathwater, taking with it beauty, depth, and sublimity, and the baby we are left with is the anemic little crying brat politics.

I suppose I shouldn't be surprised that I drew no angry replies from the post-modern crowd, from the "artists." It only proves my point: art for the sake of art is dead, and anyone who takes Art and art history seriously enough to defend them is now so *outré* as to be incomprehensible.

*Austin Chronicle*, January, 1997:

In response to Jimmy Jalapeño's letter: In keeping with that time-honored tactic of the "avant garde" of labeling anyone who disagrees with it a Nazi, a Fascist, or, the neo-equivalent, a Republican,

Jalapeeno insists that this whole aesthetic hubbub is just cover for some reactionary politics—for, as he says explicitly, getting Max and Brigid [liberals] off the Council. I don't think so, although it would be so much simpler if it were. There may be a few, hidden in holes throughout the city, who will use any means to any end, but the majority of those who agree with Michael Barnes about the lack of artistic content in Mr. Priour's work [found-art collected by the homeless] do so with no hidden agenda. Those of us who think that art should do more than mirror current social issues are not the ones who have politicized this debate. Mr. Priour did that when he chose the homeless as a concept for his latest concept piece. If he wanted his work to be judged, or talked about around town, on its aesthetic merits, why did he design a work the appreciation of which hinges on a knowledge of how the "found objects" were found?

Those who see this argument as an attack on the homeless or on Mr. Priour's integrity also miss the point. If we want to spend money on social services, and we should, let us do it in the most effective way possible. But let's not dress it up and call it art. If Mr. Priour wants to help the homeless and to be expressive in any way he sees fit, that is his right. But maybe the public is tired of found objects, propagandized art, and criticism posing as painting and sculpture, and maybe it has every right to be. Art is defined, in part, as creativity; but it takes very little creativity to find an object—even less to pay someone to find it for you. People know this.

The "found object" was invented, or at least perfected, in 1916 by Marcel Duchamp and the Dadaists, self-styled anti-artists par excellence. Mr. Priour may not see himself as an anti-artist; but he and the City, whether they mean to or not, are devaluing artistic skill just as Duchamp did. By equating finding an object with creating it, by confusing a common ability with an uncommon one, they are blurring the distinction between art and non-art. Duchamp could no longer live, as he admitted, in a Europe still inhabited by the ghosts of Michelangelo and Leonardo; and, not having the existential "courage" for suicide, he decided to kill them instead. By elevating a found commode to the level of the Sistine Chapel, by calling it art, Duchamp brought Michelangelo down to his own level, thereby freeing the non-talented "artist" from the oppression of the talented.

Modernism nearly achieved this historical murder in the 50's and 60's, but it takes more than a mustache unctuously drawn on the Mona Lisa to convince most people that found art from defectives like Duchamp is more important than great painting and sculpture. The critics, likewise defective, bought it—have bought (or sold) subsequent theories equally destructive and ridiculous—but those of us not in some 12-step program for Sour Grapes Sufferers have never been convinced.

Many may wonder if there is any art, or any hope of it, left. And if there is not, many feel a genuine loss—a loss of a deeper and more permanent aspect than that of losing the next election or being turned down for funding. We remember that there used to be an art of great power and beauty, created by skilled craftspeople whose goal was not to convince but to elevate. These artists gave our lives meaning, not as blacks, or as women, or as homosexuals, or as the homeless, but as humans. Michelangelo's *David*, for instance, is not an exclusive art for Jews, or for white males, or for marble



carving aficionados; it is great art because David, with great power and beauty, is human; I am human; it gives me hope. But what artists aspire to such anymore?

We continue to deflate beauty, craft, grace, subtlety, depth and every other artistic virtue as being anti-democratic, un-egalitarian, or otherwise regressive (without explaining how it is undemocratic to hope we all might be equally graceful rather than equally graceless), and then complain that we have nothing extraordinary to decorate our Convention Center with. And we complain that we could find no architects that could build a Center with any of these qualities. What has been lost in all of this squabbling about Modern art, of the sort that the Austin Arts Council prefers, is that real art, of the sort I am talking about, would not be less controversial, but more. Given the current political climate, Michelangelo himself could offer us a work to draw all the tourists in the world, and we would have to send him away because one little old lady was offended by its nudity, or a preacher or two feared it might be homoerotic, or because our teenage daughters might spend a little too much time at the Convention Center.

No, this argument runs far deeper than local politics. I will continue to support Max and Brigid, and to oppose Bruce and Ronnie [business *uber alles*], no matter how they vote on this issue. But we all need to ask ourselves what we want from art. If we still have a need for art with the qualities I enumerated, and I think we do, then we have to stop treating those who have and can share these qualities as elitist lepers, contradicting our "right" to be equal. We must stop judging every action on its material outcome, crowbarring our artistically-talented into advertising or computer graphics or interior decoration, where there is a ready market. If we want great art we must make a place for it. In a society where every decision is based on political and economic expediency, where we are all sexually and spiritually repressed, where all knowledge is considered pedantry and all high seriousness pretense, where stating the obvious is controversial and believing in truth is presumptuous (and, frankly, *passee*), there is no place for art. Unless we wake up from our historical stupor, I fear that the avant garde is right in this at least: the cure is likely to be just as repulsive as the disease, and the new publicly-approved "realism" we are likely to have replacing the Modern experiments will consist of an allegory representing the marriage of business and government, a portrait of William Cunningham and Jim Bob Moffett shaking hands, or a mural of Phil Gramm crossing the Rubicon.

*Austin American-Statesman* 1998.

Contra Christopher Schade's *Art Review*, Nov. 1: The psychological transparency of this attempt at critique should be an embarrassment to its author, conversant as he no doubt is with all the terms of analysis and deconstruction of postmodernism and its pseudo-literary adjuncts. His application of avant garde criteria to admittedly decorative work begs the question of his agenda, and his choice of examples and quotations only makes him look foolish. His quote about "fighting your own taste" is from a curator. Not an artist, mind you, but an administrator of art. It is understandable why a critic would listen to a curator, but not why an artist would, unless he or she was "trying to please others."

The absurdity of a curator lecturing artists would have been clear to Cezanne or Monet, but is apparently lost on the brave souls trekking from Soho to MOMA, to see what sort of courage is due this week. Does anyone really believe that Cezanne or Monet or Picasso spent one second fighting his own taste? This is just another example of critical propaganda intended to solidify a NYC inner circle's ability to define art, and thereby the art market.

Most of the great artwork of history does not "trigger ideas or issues about art." It was not intended to. No one, from Michelangelo to van Gogh, would have found analyzing art more interesting than creating it, because they could create it. Nor was Michelangelo shy about "quoting" the Greeks, or van Gogh about borrowing technique where he could find it, from Millet or Mauve or Bernard.

None of the painters reviewed by Mr. Schade rival the greatest in history, but I was not aware that they claimed to. This article says much more about the author's peculiar cathexis, however diverted, that has led him (*mit sturm und schadenfreude*) to the postmodern milieu, where painters cannot paint and writers, apparently, cannot write.

*Austin American-Statesman*, 1998

Christopher Schade opens his review of *Re-Aligning Visions*, the current exhibition at the Huntington, by proclaiming it "the most compelling... since the Vogel collection... a month ago." Wow, Chris. Really, has it been that long? And how did we get through the inspirational void of those three off-weeks?

Once again, though, I must demur. The comparison to the Vogel exhibit is apt, but not for its ambition or afflatus. Possibly the only way the Vogel exhibit's nullity could be out-nulled is by the cryospheric depths of the supercooled Visions. A "drawing" in thumbtacks; the word Rodin rubberstamped on a fluff of cotton in a box; and everywhere, gratuitously framed squiggles. All in all, a criminal waste of art supplies and an insult to treehood. I suppose I could have read the blurbs to see what all of this was meant to mean, but there is nothing in the realm of possibilities that could make a rubberstamped fluff of cotton interesting to me. I have seen enough of these mini-apologies to write them myself, anyway. The cotton symbolizes evanescence; the box, closure; the artist's name, the fleeting importance of the cult of the person or whatnot.... Fine. But give me the fleeting importance of a real creator like Rodin: you can have the sour grapes of these homunculi and homunculae if that's what appeals to you. In their quests for artistic freedom and creative alternatives, these artists have discovered only their own tininess.

Only one drawing in *Visions* deserved the name: Luis Caballero's six-foot charcoal drawing on the second floor. This masterpiece from the permanent collection of the HRC is one of the University's few works of art. Its presence in *Visions* is a mystery, though. There is nothing alternative about it, unless there is something inherently alternative in being from Bogata. Caballero's line is powerfully

expressive, with the curve and dent of greatness of a Rubens and the pathos of a Kathe Kollwitz. But the virtuosity and emotion of this work have nothing to do with the wink and the sneer, the slip and slur of the rest of the show. As an example, this drawing hangs directly across from a gigantic triptych, by who cares who, "quoting" (read "blaspheming") half a dozen greater artists, including Ingres, Goya, and Picasso. With sub-collegiate draughtsmanship and many cubic feet of effort, this artist mocks a tradition he apparently has no ability to transcend. Why do we care? Or, I should say, why does the cadre of curators and other academics who organized this show care? Why do we continue to be confronted with 200-page catalogs, weeks of lectures and other backslapping, and asinine corporate sponsorship, all in support of a show of trifling exiguity?

I have a message for all of you from the Muse, and it is this: Art needs no curation, analysis, critique, or corporate sponsorship. It suffers of your goodwill.

Letters to the Editor

*Smithsonian*

2002

It is not necessary to look for historical evidence for or against David Hockney's theories. Simply, if a living artist could do what Hockney believes can't be done (draw quickly, accurately, and fluidly without the aid of devices; enlarge or reduce at will; transfer three dimensions to two with an innate understanding of perspective), his theory could be put to rest. If I can do it, why not Caravaggio or Velasquez? I challenge Mr. Hockney to a public draw-off, with a Smithsonian cameraman to record it for posterity. If your readers are really interested in the role talent played in the past, and not just in Mr. Hockney's futile attempts to raise himself to the level of the Old Masters, this would be a thing to sell tickets to.

But I have my doubts. Anyone who considered the question seriously for a moment would see that the artists of Modernism were picked *because* they couldn't draw. Art Moderne is not about that anymore. It is about theory and politics and, most of all, promotion. You assume that if someone with the skill of Vandyck or Sargent were out there now, you would know of it. But you know of what the curators and critics want you to know of. Talent like that is not properly inclusive, properly democratic: a transcendent art, an art of elevation, only makes the modern man feel bad, as Mr. Hockney makes clear. I always find it amusing, even in my poverty, that the rich and famous are kept up at night by the truth. But I can't allow Mr. Hockney to air his denial at the expense of my "great forefathers" without speaking out.

I remain amazed that prominent editors cannot see the psychological transparency of Mr. Hockney's public disintegration. He is supposed to be an artist. An artist creates things of beauty or depth or subtlety or power. Because he has not been able to do this in his long career, he has finally stooped to the level of attacking other people's creations. He has joined Duchamp, who could not bear the fact that

the public remained more interested in the Old Masters than in him; so he set out to bring them down to his level. Destroy the past. Then they must look at your work, no matter how pathetic. It is absolutely infantile, and yet there seems to be a large constituency for such envy, and it apparently includes many of high rank in art and publishing.

I suggest you look again at the book Mr. Hockney has offered us on this matter, at great expense to some foolish publisher. Mr. Hockney's own examples of what he was able to create, given all these cheating tricks, are ludicrous. My talented friends and I had quite a laugh, especially on the page where he was deluded enough to put Old Master drawings on one page, and his drawings (done with lenses) on the facing page.

You claim in your header that Mr. Hockney has made a "bold" discovery. I fail to see any boldness in attacking one's ancestors and superiors. In fact, it is so pusillanimous as to be almost beyond belief. If it had not already been a staple of the avant garde agenda since the beginning—this resentment—I don't think anyone *would* believe it. As it is, the art public has become accustomed to its own supine position.

You don't have to accept my claims of talent. Simply go to any advanced art class, in any large city. You will see artists drawing from live models, without aids of any kind, doing things far beyond what Mr. Hockney is able to achieve with lenses, photos, or even projection. Great art requires much more than this sort of extreme hand-eye coordination, but this ability lives on even now~and it remains our only hope for great visual art in the future.

In fact I beg you to go to such a class and do a story on the abilities shown there. A story like that would be vastly more useful to young artists and to the public, and more interesting at the same time. Art History is already at a nadir: it cannot benefit from more selfish "deconstruction." What is required is re-construction.

I had expected this post-modern sour-grapes attitude from *ARTnews*, and even from the *New Yorker* (both have already reported on Mr. Hockney's de-evolution into the critic). But I was disappointed to find *Smithsonian* leaping onto the bandwagon. Do get off. It is not a place you want to be, historically.

*Salon*, 2001:

I don't like George Will, either. I voted Green. But your article was at least as unimpressive as his. All your snide ad hominem remarks smacked of high school journalism and the chummy insiderism of PoMo (or whatever it is called now). George Will is wrong because he is wrong, not because he is not cool enough to hang with your friends.

Your understanding of art is no keener than his. At one point you say that most scholars disagree with

Will. Who cares what scholars think? Art is for artists. Scholars and critics and journalists simply do not know what they are talking about. If they did, they would be artists. That is the central problem of contemporary art. The artists have been inundated with outside "help"~from your side and Will's side~until they cannot hear themselves think. They are all impressing the phonies in one club or another, and can't take time out to actually learn a craft or develop an idea.

Later you make the observation that a government could not promote excellence and still call itself a democracy. I don't know what this means. Why not? Does a democratic person simply stop making distinctions? There is no connection between democracy and relativism, although you seem to think there is. Do you think Goya or van Gogh or Picasso or whoever you like had no idea of excellence in art? In your rush to promote yourself and your friends, you are disregarding the entire history of art, not to say of the world. Will is wrong to think that money and institutions, by themselves, can promote art or excellence or anything else. And he is wrong to think that the Republican party gives a damn about art. But he is in the ballpark in his criticisms of PoMo~its laziness, its self-indulgence, its low ambition, its gratuitous brutality, its ingratitude to its ancestry, its insistence on the centrality of politics. Art is a gift from the individual to the group. It should be a product of the Id, not of the Superego. As such, it is intrinsically non-political. Art can only be polluted by politics and group expectations. And it is polluted just as quickly (and at the present time, much more often) from the left as from the right.

*Sculpture Review*, 1994

I disagree strongly with the assumptions and conclusions in your "Reflections of Representation" opinion in the spring edition. In trying to include Lucian Freud in the ranks of true artists despite his "dissonance," you do, in fact, "descend to a relativistic lack of stance." Freud, and the Modern attitude he represents, goes far beyond dissonance, or even misery and ugliness: his cowardice and falseness disqualify him from any claims to greatness and, in my opinion, from being considered an artist at all.

You mention your friend's comparison of Freud with Rembrandt, but this comparison is misguided. For while Rembrandt deserves credit for painting the truth "without a putative overlay of prettiness," there is nothing honest about Freud's figure painting, which depicts flesh, among other things, with a diseased overlay of disgust and hopelessness~a hopelessness representative not of any complex truth in his subjects or of life in general, but only of his pathetic view of his own life. This view may well be sincere (or not) but I can't see that it should be of interest to any healthy person, or any person interested in health.

You assert that Freud "survives and flourishes." But anyone who has read of Freud's life knows that he has not flourished. He would be the first to admit this. Modern artists do not "flourish." Bernini flourished. Rodin flourished. The only thing in Freud's life that has flourished is his bank account, and this only because so many in the upper echelons of art criticism so easily identify with his pathology.

I do not believe any more than you do that art should be limited to subjects of "harmony," or that art must be beautiful or comforting. The highest art is a complex art that recognizes and attempts to understand life as it is, positive and negative. Michelangelo, Rembrandt, Goya, and van Gogh are examples of this complex attitude that struggles to affirm life despite its squalor and confusion, its pain and ugliness. Van Gogh's sunshine and flowers, peasants and whores, are not at all an "ideal of the beautiful," are not at all an antithesis to Freud in the way you mean. Van Gogh's subjects contain great quantities of pain, misery, and squalor. But this is not all they contain: the pain is subsumed (one might say consumed), but never excised, by a belief in art, and in life, that is finally redemptive—confirming the importance, if not the beauty, of existence. This struggle for redemption defines van Gogh's art, despite his suicide.

Freud is the antithesis to van Gogh, and all great artists, not because he expresses "pain and wretchedness" where they do not, but because he lacks complexity and expresses only the pain and wretchedness. And in doing so he falsifies his art just as surely as did Sargent or Canova or any other outcasts of Modern criticism. Freud is a nihilist embedded in contemporary existential theory and he can find no meaning in anything~his wretchedness and discontent become artistic ends in themselves. He is one of Nietzsche's "despisers of life," and as such he deserves neither the support that he and the other Modernists have gotten from contemporary "Nietzscheans" nor the support he gets from the present "community of artists" (from which, to admit the truth, many fine realists have been excluded in preference for those such as Freud).

You ask, "What, in fact, is the purpose of representation?" but do not answer, letting a denial of relativism and low standards stand as your response. But this failure to answer is relativism, this acceptance of all values is relativism. If you can't stand on principle against the nihilism of Freud and the Moderns, what can you stand for? And when even the spokesman for one of the last enclaves of traditional art~an art attacked viciously and slandered without scruple for an entire century by those who would promote Freud and his precursors~is still mouthing this weak-kneed inclusionist policy, even as the history of art collapses at his feet, we see why representational art has degenerated into such a pitiful state, and why a magazine professing a respect for history has almost nothing of importance to add to that history.

### *Sculpture Review*

In your Fall 2000 article on the *Artists' Words*, Laura Zeigler and Elizabeth MacQueen both make extremely confrontational remarks about men in general. Ms. Zeigler says that "Women are strong, and men can use all the help they can get." Ms. MacQueen is even more bitter. She speaks of the "advancing imbalance of the destructive masculine and the nurturing feminine," claiming she no longer needs "phalladation." Then she states, "I am one who is blessed with transcendence."

What she is not blessed with, apparently, is humility, or with the ability to write or think clearly. She

and her editor should be informed that epicene is an adjective not a noun, and that its definition may still be found in the dictionary. Her context begs for the word epicenter, although this too would be imprecise and exclamatory. One also wonders where she stole "scabrous strength" from and why she cannot use it properly. The sentence in which it is embedded is a melange of mixed metaphors and overwrought sentiment. And the tone of her quote as a whole makes one doubt the unerring nurturing quality of the feminine.

In the name of fairness and equality, I hope you will publish an issue devoted only to men, and allow them to make statements about how strong and transcendent they are, and how helpless and pathetic and evil women are.

*USNews*, 2001

Despite its claim that girls are supposed to be better writers than boys, *Boys, the Weaker Sex?* by Anna Mulrine is in fact a very poor piece of writing. It is also a very poor example of science; but Ms. Mulrine acknowledges the shortcoming of girls there, so we must not hold her to very high standards in that arena, I suppose.

It is a poor piece of writing not for grammatical or syntactical reasons, but for logical and moral ones. Its premises do not lead to its conclusions. And its unstated moral assumptions are inconsistent.

In a very cursory manner, Ms. Mulrine mentions several studies that show boys are having trouble in school. But we already know where she is going with this, since her opening paragraphs are all anecdotal examples of successful girls. And we knew even before that. The whole article is explained by its title: it is set up to provide a yes answer, one that will promote a transparent agenda. One is led to the distinct possibility that the article was written around the title, rather than the title being superadded at the end.

But not even the skewed research she quotes supports her conclusion that boys are in any way weaker. What struck me most strongly was that she used studies that showed boys are more emotional (more strongly affected by stimuli) than girls to support her contention that they are weaker. This turns the historical argument on its head. Women (and men) have argued for ages that the emotional qualities of women were their strong suit. They were more responsive to other's feelings, more likely to be altruistic, more caring and devoted, more peaceful (for instinctual, not social reasons, we were told). That is why equality was once supposed to be such a boon to society.

If new research is proving that boys are more passionate, too, I don't see that this is much for women to crow about. Our physical strength is conceded, as are our powers of reasoning. If we actually have stronger emotions as well, then this explains why all the great artists have been men. We are better at



three-dimensional construction and manual dexterity and now we are more passionate (Ms. Mulrine tells us): that is the definition of art.

Ms. Mulrine never considers the possibility that boys are doing poorly in institutional America simply because institutional America is set up to encourage girls at all points and to discourage boys. Her article, and USNews' publishing it, is just one more example of this. Can anyone imagine a magazine editor allowing an article by a man to go to print with the title *Girls, the Weaker Sex*? No, that would be "damaging." It would be the cause of a million feminist rants. How many masculist rants do you suppose Ms. Mulrine's article will cause? Or, more to the point, how many do you think will be published or taken seriously? None. I cannot remember the last time any man~not on the far right~was allowed a sentence in the "gender wars." Possibly Norman Mailer in the late 70's. Since then the only ones who have had anything to say on our side have been women: Paglia, Hoff Summers, Roiphe. Is this a level playing field?

Because nothing gets published, many women assume that all men on the left agree with them. But I am not a dittohead; I voted for Nader. I read Chomsky and Wendell Berry. I know good writing and thinking when I see it. Ms. Mulrine's is not it.

She cites better grades in English class and higher rates in the honor society as proof that girls are stronger. But I remember that in my high school half the senior class was in the honor society due to grade inflation. Nor could my honors English class have been called a great measure of intelligence or strength. It was perhaps a measurement of how much busy work and asinine critical analysis one could put up with. As for PSAT and SAT scores and success in college, the same sort of argument can be made. The PSAT counts verbal twice and math once. The bias here is clear, although I have never seen it mentioned anywhere. And all the standardized tests have changed since I was in high school: reading comp sections have been added and the math sections have been watered down to help girls. If they refashion society enough, they can believe whatever they want to about themselves. But I thought that was the feminine critique of patriarchy.

On TV men are portrayed as boobs and morons, while women are all-powerful goddesses (Xena) or sexy Ninja-droids (Dark Angel). Women form blocks and vote against men (Survivor, Weakest Link, etc.), revelling in "girl-power." If men did the same thing, they would be looked on as cretins.

Perhaps worst of all, many of those promoting the "superior woman" agenda~including many of the best-known names in the field of womens studies~have been shown to have fudged or manufactured data. Sadker, one of those that Ms. Mulrine quotes by name, was shown by Christina Hoff Summers to be one of the least scrupulous in this area. Apparently the means justifies the ends for these "scientists." The ends of feminism used to be equality. But I think the title of this article proves that equality is no longer enough. The new feminist is not interested in fairness. She is interested in raw power, at any price. I recommend she recalculate the price. . . if her math skills are up to it.

*American Artist*, March 2003

I was disappointed—but not really surprised—to see your technical page editor give her unqualified opinion that blending with the fingers was an inferior method for pastel. I was not surprised because this has been the dogma for years. However I must disagree with her, categorically, and admonish her for her narrowness. To state that there is one "best technique" in any medium is foolish. But to assert, without qualification or the least hedging, that the predominant pastel technique in history is now superceded is asinine. Most of the greatest pastellists in history have used their fingers to smudge, including of course Degas. The contemporary preference for neat and tidy drawings with pure color is nothing but a prejudice—a prejudice most often based (in my experience) on timidity and conformity. Modern pastellists, as judged from the standards of the past, would seem a tight little bunch of wonks, scared to touch the page for fear of soiling themselves or their technique in some way. I can see them (I *have* seen them) sitting in their shrink-wrapped chairs, clothed in their scotch-guarded smocks, with plastic gloves and surgical masks and ventilators, fearful lest a splinter of chalk should break free and lodge in their eye, and thinking "Oh, where are my safety goggles?"

The truth is that all this fastidiousness has led to a glut of antiseptic drawings, memorable not for any clean use of color but for a glaring lack of passion, personality, subtlety and nuance. The pages of *American Artist* and other realist magazines are full of them, as are the various shows around the country, judged by the same sort of people. It is a shame that this cycle cannot seem to break itself, since the role of expert and teacher continues to fall to the same insiders; and we hear the same cramped, false opinions over and over. And see the same amateurish work, paraded as scintillating, again and again.

*New York Times*, April 12, 2003

In his article on Remington, Holland Cotter's tacit assumptions are rather shocking, once one unburies them. He assumes that anyone who feels that modern society is going in the wrong direction is a vile person. Anyone who feels nostalgic is a crass sentimentalist. The famous counter-examples would take a year to list. Beyond that he assumes that an artist must have a winning personality, and that he must agree with all the contemporary "progressives". I can't think of a great artist who ever did. For example, van Gogh is universally loved now—he is almost a saint. But he had a terrible personality, by modern standards, and wasn't progressive even in his own time. Picasso, still the standard bearer of the avant garde, was a reactionary misogynist, a bully, a braggart, and a shameless toady to the rich and famous. I can't think of a single great artist who passes Cotter's test. But Cotter's most absurd assumption is that we have better modern things to put in the great museums than Remington's "hokey" canvases. Remington doesn't compare favorably with Titian or even Waterhouse, for artistic reasons. But based on Holland's own stated criteria, Remington surely has greater claim to wall-space than the darlings of the avant garde, whose *oeuvres* and personalities make Remington look like a god.

Like all contemporary criticism, Holland's looks very cutting until one remembers what, and who, he is arguing for. Perhaps the winning personality and plumbless depth of a Schnabel or Salle or Hirst or Kiefer or Twombly or Johns? How about Lucian Freud and Marcel Duchamp and Andy Warhol and Francis Bacon?—now that would be a lovely dinner party, filled with bright good cheer and brotherly love and a glass raised to the future of mankind! And their works! Ah, a feast for the eyes not obtainable outside the chain-link fence at the city impound or the metal doors of the morgue.

And lastly, one remembers whose hand is on the pen of Holland's article—a member of that class of people with the least-winning personalities, that class with no works~the critic.

*Austin Chronicle*, Nov. 1996:

Yes, that title "America is an Artist" set me off before I even read Michael Ventura's latest piece. I admit it. I knew I was going to be very hard to convince. And when he rounded out his opinion with a quote from Nietzsche, troping Nietzsche's adjective "all-too-human" by standing it on its head, I knew that a response was in order, and I knew how to frame it.

Mr. Ventura's more-than-apparent goodwill, his willingness to speak from the heart, and his penchant for grand subject matter has taken him a long way, and I was impressed by his first three or four articles for the *Chronicle*~articles where, for whatever reason, both his prose and his polemics were more disciplined. It must be difficult to be truly incisive week in, week out, but the sloppy thinking in this latest article cannot be passed over as a slow night's work. It is more than cosmetic. When writing about the X-Files or Las Vegas, it is enough to be entertaining. But if you are going to milk my sacred cow, you best know where the udders are.

To gloss the central thesis: America is the most inventive country in the history of the world. Artists are also inventive. America must be an artist. Some of us, too weak to fully embrace the artist within, react politically. This is understandable, though "small-minded." That's it. Beautifully reductive. Clear and quick-moving. With lots of examples and references and famous people's names. And false, false, false. Ventura makes no attempt to differentiate between inventive, original, creative, and artistic. He elides from inventor to scientist to artist, slurring all distinctions. There is no discussion of the quality of creativity or inventiveness involved in various actions. And there is no mention of the value of these actions. His goggled-eyed amazement in the face of capital-N Novelty, undifferentiated, is sorely distressing. I expect such asinine horn-tooting from the advertisers and boosters of the world, selling us on our pathetic selves. But not here. Ventura needs sobering up, and I recommend Wendell Berry's prose as just the tonic.

I suggest that, as far as quantity goes, 20th century America is most inventive for purely statistical reasons. We have the most people with the most free time. But this is no reason, in and of itself, for

backslapping. Very little of what we now do is memorable. The scientific advance since the time of Newton, really, is miraculous, but this does not make America or anyone else an artist. Define art a little more narrowly, and it becomes clear that most of America's art legacy is not in creativity or construction, but in deconstruction. Ventura does not mention that the novel, the short story, the poem, the easel painting, the free-standing sculpture, the art object in general, have all been deconstructed by us. Nor does he note that most of the artists he names fled the U.S. in search of an artistic milieu, hated America, and are now treated only as artifacts. Poe and Eliot may have invented the modern short story and poem, for example, but the contemporary short story and poem are far-removed, nearly debtless little beasts. Popular music and film are quite healthy, and some of the output might be called artistic, but no one could accuse these media of being top-heavy.

There are brilliant people in this country and wonderful things are being done, but in general America is most emphatically not an artist. America is a business, where some creative output is merchandized as entertainment. All else is obsolescent or obsolete. Even on the fringes, outside the markets, America is an artist only by the most generous of definitions. America is a self-indulgent, unrefined artist, sciolistic and presumptuous. Our shallow political character is not a reaction to our artistic depth. They are two sides of a one-sided coin. Inundated by information and analysis, our left-brains now have a thousand ways of saying, of intimating, nothing~with three or four more discovered each week; while our Ids, grounded only in last week's news and a few misty quasi-Freudian memories of our pre-television selves, subsist bulimically on the spiritual equivalent of Dexatrim and Diet Coke.

Ventura might have addressed the degenerate state of modern American creativity, a state that Nietzsche was good enough to all but predict for us, a state more frightening than any episode of the X-Files or even Millenium, because true. But this would have meant taking on the highly original bunch who get their stroking from the *Chronicle*, and who no doubt do not want to hear it.

Letters to the Editor, *Austin American-Statesman*, Nov. 1997:

Thanks to Michael Barnes for hitting a few nails on the head regarding the Austin Museum of Art [Nov. 28]. Of course, for my money, he could have been a bit less even-handed. I know what he meant when he said it was "defensible" to follow the trends of Soho—politically, not artistically, defensible—but that just won't cut it anymore. Art "as a trend" never had the support of any serious artists, and the day of the glamorous Nonartist, posing next to his vast spillage, is fading to dusk, even in NYC. The artist of the near future will not be able to hide behind political and theoretical props, if only because that's been done before.

So it is no great loss that The Museum hasn't wasted a lot of taxdollars buying "experimental" art for a permanent collection. Who can remember individual works from the past twenty years of Laguna Gloria shows? Who would pay to see them again? Damn few.

Are we planning a new museum because we want larger traveling shows of the same sort? It may get bigger, folks, but it doesn't get any better. We can step up from poorly attended small shows to poorly attended big shows. But if you don't like it by the spoonful, don't order it by the glass.

The problem is the big-city wannabes and the art-history phonies who think that building big modern spaces and following trends is the same as being artistic. The dubious selectivity of this sort of do-gooder has already administered all the lasting value from "art" in America, and nothing good can come from more such patronage. It would be wonderful if the public cared more about art, but the simple fact is that they won't until they see art they care about. It is the artists who must solve this dilemma, after we climb out from under all the curation and analysis. Once we do, then we might need a museum.

Letters to the Editor, *Austin American-Statesman*, Dec. 1997 [unpublished]

How lovely. A response [Jic Clubb, Dec. 19]. I had hoped for something a wee bit more incisive than "goodness gracious," but I work with what I have. Irony isn't it, Mr/s. Clubb, preferring modern art but asking for subtlety in polemics? 'Tis a topsy-turvy world, where we only want to be hit over the head with our art. Clever thing, too, playing the victim: *you realist bullies have all your Santa Fe galleries and SAMI shows, just let us have our little museum. The avant garde has rights, too. Tra-la*. But, if you please, it's an even shorter drive to Dallas or Houston, where you can be startled all you want.

Your argument is a perfect *hysteron proteron*: a contemporary museum shows experimental work, according to you, because that's what a contemporary museum does. Likewise, that curators are fools is something I must accept *a priori*. You don't say so, of course, but the reason these are givens is that the avant garde is now the status quo. You control the NEA, the universities, the critics, the magazines, and the museums. Of course I appear Quixotic. You don't need to argue with me, you have the numbers. You can afford the blase grin because you've safely defined everyone with any talent out of the game. Beuys pronounced easel painting dead; if you other boys can just kill off all the other beauties of the world, your own work may start to look interesting after all.

When you imagine the alternative to Modernism, Mr/s. Clubb, you see "purple peaks" and other such nonsense. Which is precisely why you should not think about art at all. Art is neither novelty nor decoration, and to imply that it must be one or the other is to be a pest. I have better things to do than shoo flies.

Nietzsche once blasted Wagner for claiming that his music was not "mere music." Nietzsche said rightly, "No musician would say that." Likewise, I say that art does not need politics or literature or activism or criticism or theory to leaven it. Painting needs painters. Sculpture needs sculptors. Everyone else is an intrusion. So I hope you won't be offended when I say, *get the hell out of my way*.

*Austin American-Statesman*, Jan. 1998

Regarding Judy Jenson's article [on the choice of art for the newly built Convention Center, including found-art collected by the homeless]: Oh the ignominy of being called an "obscure artist" by that household name Judy Jenson. Chided like a child, a "fifth grader," for questioning the authority of an "arts professional." Don't we obscure artists, like the little "laymen," know that this argument is not for us? To us it must be "clearly explained," after which Ms. Jenson will no doubt clarify the Korean nuclear threat and global warming (by dismissing them as trumped-up controversies). Then milk and cookies.

The only thing that rang true about her patronage was the admission that "panelists must *endure* [emphasis mine] days of studying proposals." Nice word choice. Otherwise she utterly failed to address the question, that being *what is art?* I assert that the definition of art is not "good deeds" or "being warm-hearted" or "social activism" or "finding an interesting object." Art is extraordinary skill married to high emotion. People know this, warm-hearted people who nevertheless are not quite sanguine about being hoodwinked.

*Harper's Magazine* May 1998

In your May issue, one of your cover stories was called "Where Women are Women and so are Men". Initially I found it somewhat refreshing to see Fay Weldon bucking the party line, voicing her concern about what she calls "therapism" and the consequences of a loss of masculinity, both for men and for women. But the overall tone of the article, and the way *Harper's* presented it, belittled men more than it defended them. It was offensive, one supposes purposefully, because it implied that men are unable to defend themselves: that because of their need for sex, men are now at the mercy of women, who can give or take at will. This "defense" of men made women appear very powerful. The last sentence of the article was "Women win."

What is most irritating is that men are continually being insulted in the media with no opportunity for response. There is a lot of dishing out and no taking. One suspects that this article was made more publishable both by the fact that its author is a woman and by the fact that she is English—she is defending and attacking, at least explicitly, *Englishmen*. Hence all the tweaking is given a distance, and all we "female" men in the US can pass it off as in good fun. But it is clear that men are not represented on the gender issue in print, in England as here, not because we lack the balls to write a response, but because most journals do not think this is the time for male opinions on the subject. It is not that there are no publishable works, it is that there are no *published* works, and this is clearly not the same thing.

Or so I assume. Weldon said that men are too passive and competitive to respond to female "oppression," except for "religious nuts." I am not a religious nut. Nor would I qualify my difficulties

of the past five years, stunning as they are, as "oppression." But I *will* go on record, under my own name, even under my own photograph, to reply to the unilateral assault that now passes for a "gender war." I am neither a Norman Mailer, with a big name and a history of well-known battles, nor a bitter talk-show combatant, ready to hurl insults and trade horror stories. I am simply a casualty: one that a few may miss somewhere down the line. An attractive, well-educated, sensitive young man, so far left on most issues as to be almost un-American; with, however, my backbone still intact. If Wendell Berry were a generation younger and single he might feel the need to write something like this "Letter from the Front", I like to think. I have dated over 100 women in the past five years, not because I have any fondness for variety (in fact, I have been looking to settle down all along) but because I refuse to play dead. The beautiful, intelligent women I am attracted to have forgotten, somewhere in the deluge of advice they have absorbed, that in order to impress a potential lover, they must be *nice*. And so I have been forced to move on; to try again. And again, and again. In this article, I suggest that even the model male companion dreamed of by feminism has been sacrificed to its evermore self-indulgent demands. The standard issue young woman, as promoted by the media and all our institutions, and as now exists, near enough, on college campuses and cutting-edge corporations throughout the country, is undatable, uncourttable, and unbearable, for any man with any self-respect left. Ignoring that fact, because it is presently unpalatable, does none of us any good. These things will sort themselves out eventually, but I cannot live my sexual life eventually, and neither can they. We must live now. It is ridiculous to claim, as Weldon baldly claims, that "women can live without men easier than men can live without women." Such a claim is an empty boast in a power struggle, a desperate attempt to deny loneliness, and nobody really buys it. Not me and not the women themselves. A relationship cannot be defined wholly by either partner. Not, as historically, by the man. And not, as now, by the woman. And so some feedback is in order from their "equal partner."

The rest of the article speaks for itself, and so I will not repeat myself here. But I hope you agree that it is past time to call a truce. Not to capitulate from a position of weakness; but to suggest a cease-fire, since the losses are too high on both sides. Women may have won. But Pyrrhus, on a field of mangled bodies, also won.

The Editor, *Harper's*, May 29, 1999

The problem with the male counterpoint in the gender wars has been its self-imposed need to be supportive and non-confrontational, while still trying to defend a bit of territory. Nothing substantive has been said by a man since Mailer threw in the towel, unless you count Paglia as a man. Women have felt free to say anything they wanted, no matter how mean-spirited or absurd, while men have tried to be considerate. Your Ehrenreich/Tiger "debate" followed these lines exactly.

Tiger makes intellectual non-points while Ehrenreich spouts nonsense about *Playboy* being a political tool of men, or about men inventing war to make themselves appear useful. Absolute balderdash. But you can't find a man capable of saying so?



Ehrenreich and Tiger never got anywhere near the central issue in all this persiflage. A heterosexual man's number one desire in life is to have sex with a woman/women. A heterosexual woman's number one desire is to have sex with a man/men. Everybody who is not lost in some neurosis knows this. The only men who will not admit this are those who know it is bad policy to be so honest. The only women who will not admit this are those who can't make it work in their agenda. If women aren't interested in sex/men, why are the magazines, books, movies and TV programs that women watch or read stuffed with sex appeal? If the intellectual women who are above these forms of entertainment are not interested in sex/men, why are they trying to convince us of anything? If we aren't good for anything, then leave us alone of your cant.

Ehrenreich made it clear that she doesn't really give a damn about what is happening to young men: we still aren't getting out of the way fast enough. But why didn't Tiger ask her about all these young women she is supposedly representing? There may not yet be 100% equity in average pay or in number of CEO's, but young women are now in control of their own sexual happiness like never before. We are told this by the (older) women themselves. Lesbianism is cool. Multiple partners. Celibacy. Onanism. Why, then, aren't they happy? Men aren't happy because they aren't getting any. This is common knowledge. But if men aren't getting any, then it is logical to assume that, in the same numbers, women aren't. Might they be unhappy for the same reason?

Feminism's demonization of men has created a generation of neurotics who are attracted to men but cannot intellectually justify loving them. So they cut themselves up and publicly commit all kinds of verbal suttee, blaming their inertia on men and digging their holes deeper and deeper. It is no form of grace to continue to contenance this immolation. Good men don't. Women always threaten that they can use sex as a weapon. I have always found this unappealingly Machiavellian. But men can and do refuse to have sex with women who cannot be reasonable and considerate: not as a weapon, but because they do not want to.

As much as I hate deconstruction, this debate simply begs for analysis: its only interest for any healthy person is as a pathological symptom of everyone involved. Ehrenreich's choice of Tiger was instructive: no real man would let his name stand below the title "What are Men Good For?" Nor would he back down when confronted with Steinem's "bicycle" quote. He would say, "Damn right it's offensive. Don't pretend it wasn't meant to be. You vicious old cunts aren't ever again going to get laid by a man worth laying with until you cut the crap." And why in hell does Lapham continue to allow articles with titles like "Why Englishmen are Women" and "What are Men Good For?" go to press? He's either impotent or he thinks that his last best chance is capitulation. It's time to arrest the pussification of modern journalism.

Leslie Stahl, *CBS News*, 2002

In your article on female gender bias, Dr. Michael Thompson asks, "Where are the men who should be advocating for boys? Why is there no outcry from men?" Or something to that effect. The simple answer, which is not addressed in this article, is that men are speaking out, but that the media is not listening. I have now seen several articles like this one, where the "crisis" in general is reported on; but even here there are no men advocating for the rights of men. It is still not allowed in the current discussion. We haven't reached the point where it is OK for men to be given a self-advocating voice on a par with women. We are still in a predominately feminist mode, with regards to rights and advocacy, and it is not really believed that men have anything to complain about, except in the sort of anomalistic way that this article treats it. Even here, you have Dr. Thompson mouthing feminist rhetoric—that the fault is the fathers', that men still make more money, etc. The main point of these new Gender Gap articles, it seems to me, is to post a subtle cheer. Gloating posing as pity. *Those poor men, now they need help. (Hurrah!)*

How do I know that men are speaking out? I know because I am one of the men speaking out, and not being published. I have seen the male side of the argument being taken up by Camille Paglia, Katie Roiphe, Christina Hoff Sommers, and a few others, and I am thankful for their efforts. But I find it astonishing that no magazine has published a counter-critique to some of the specifics of neo-feminism by a man. I don't think I've seen so much as a letter to the editor published in any magazine, concerning feminism and by a man, since the time of Norman Mailer (in the 80's). Are we to believe that no man on the left has disagreed with the slew of offensive articles published by *The Nation*, *Harper's*, and many other magazines and newspapers? Just as an example, see *Why all Englishmen are Women* (*Harper's*, 1998); *What are Men Good For?* (Barbara Ehrenreich debating Lionel Tiger, *Harper's* 1999); *Boys, the Weaker Sex?* (*USNews*, 2001); *Why There Are No Good Men Left* (*Atlantic*, 2002). I myself have written letters to the editor on these articles and many others, and submitted articles on these topics to many magazines, only to be met with silence or contempt. Without exception I am treated as if I am a neo-nazi neanderthal—tunneling in from the *National Review* or the *Heritage Foundation*—when in fact I voted for Nader and have as heroes people like Chomsky and Wendell Berry. If I am being refused because I am not a famous person or a PhD in the field, that does not explain why no famous person or PhD in the field is being published.

I do not believe for a minute, like Dr. Thompson apparently does, that men have just lain down and accepted the new world of feminine superiority. Or that they don't care about themselves or their sons. Or that they are too busy making money and playing sports to see the writing on the wall. Or that they have ignored recent skirmishes because they feel so secure in their positions. The male side of the argument is simply not being published or reported on. I do not want to be exclamatory and call it censorship. It is editorial discretion, but editorial discretion that is more and more reaching the level of suppression. In order to promote equity, men have not been given anything like equal time in the discussion of gender politics. Thirty years ago this may have made some sense. Now it is reaching the point of absurdity, where one sex is determining policy in an entire field. It cannot work for either sex. It cannot work for women because they have less and less objectivity about themselves. Without critique, they become utterly self-indulgent and unrealistic, as Camille Paglia has pointed out. Women

are no more self-correctable and self-perfectable than men are.

The gender wars have gone the way they have for political reasons: women have devoted more time to them, and been much less scrupulous. And the hours are paying off, in the short term. But the sexes cannot separate themselves. What affects one affects the other. Early feminism preached this; late feminism tries to ignore it. Late feminism tries to score points at the expense of men. It will not work. For two reasons. One, a debilitated masculinity is finally of no interest to women, for themselves. Two, men are not weak. A push beyond basic fairness will not be tenable. You can call it a backlash if you want, but it is strictly self-defense.

*Atlantic Monthly*, May 18, 2000

Another great cover story [Unabomber/Harvard]. *Atlantic Monthly* is the last general interest magazine standing. *The New Yorker*~overrated since the 70's~finally imploded, Lapham is in senescence at *Harper's* (or he has let Ehrenreich take over, I don't know), but you guys just keep getting better.

I have a couple of comments on Alston Chase's article. I agree that Kaczynski is a mystery that needs to be solved, but Chase's final page of commentary~what one might call his summation~was overly broad, abstract, and finally unconvincing. In the first sentence of this last section he mentions the "corrosive powers of intellect itself." This is a dangerous *non-sequitur* that should make any intelligent person wince. There may be many lessons to be learned from history, and from a consideration of Kaczynski, but I don't think that is one of them. Chase implies that intellect is necessarily arrogant. But it is not knowledge that is corrosive: it is what we learn, or fail to learn. Our "capacity to conceive theories or philosophies that promote violence," or to conceive any esoteric theories whatever, is not the problem. To conceive is not to believe. People much stupider than Kaczynski choose to believe things that, while less wordy, are just as flawed and just as violent.

The problem appears to be that Kaczynski, despite having a genius IQ, was still not smart enough to sort through all the inconsistencies and holes of a modern education and the brutalities of an American upbringing. This comes as no surprise, really; but putting it in these terms is surely less alienating (and confusing) than dredging up the "nature of evil" and Stalin and martyrdom and being shocked that dogs backed into a corner do bite.

For instance, Chase's most telling section is where he touches on the difference between relativism and absolutism. He sees Kaczynski as an absolutist in a relativist society, and he is right. But then he states that Kaczynski "absorbed the message of positivism, which demanded value-free reasoning...." Here is the internal inconsistency, the worm in the nut. When it comes to "truth," Kaczynski is an absolutist. When it comes to action, or "morality," he is a relativist: "there is no logical justification for morality." But, in that case, Ted, there is no logical justification for immorality. Nor is there any logical justification for "wild nature," or for condemning technology.

Chase and Kaczynski both start out trying to justify an intellectual stance against relativism, but end up making absolutists look bad~Kaczynski by trying to justify violence with pseudo-philosophy and

Chase by getting lost in platitudes and abstractions.

What begs to be said in this article, and in modern education in general, is that there are two types of "absolutism" that have long been confused. There is the absolutism of the "Deutschland uber alles" sort, which is obviously absurd. And then there is the absolutism that states that for any specific situation, there are better and worse ways of doing things. This sort of absolutism has never been refuted. It is common sense. But even the most intelligent thinkers often get lost in the move from general to specific. Advances in "tolerance" have led to an increased awareness that general statements (especially truth statements) are not as easy to defend as we once thought. Truth is relative to the situation. But this is not to say there is no truth. For any given situation, the facts remain. Truth, in any specific case, is not relative.

Likewise, the problem with scientists is not that they are corrosively intelligent or that science itself is evil. It is that scientists are very poor philosophers, and very poorly socialized. "Humanism" has not filled the void of a dead religion because humanism is itself a void. The humanities are a dead letter. As a society we expend almost no money, time, or intelligence teaching or considering these most important questions, except in the most fleeting and cursory manner. People take up "self-help" like it is a hobby, a stop-gap, or a drug. Our psychology departments are booming, but that is no cause for celebration. Modern psychology is a shallow substitute for classical philosophy. Positivism, behaviorism, and various other narrow filters have been put on a natural curiosity, and even our reading lists have become dessicated.

There are apparently no longer any living sources of wisdom, or none that are paid to lecture at Harvard or Berkeley. We spend unbelievable amounts of money recruiting and educating scientists and businesspeople, endowing chairs and underwriting research. We spend no money or time producing people who know how to live. Kaczynski and Chase fled to Montana to to buy themselves peace: they just read the wrong books, or read them in poor light. Those less intelligent, also lacking teachers worthy of respect, read even worse books~L. Ron Hubbard or Kahlil Gibran or B.F. Skinner.

Nothing will change until we begin teaching people how to live again. Not as dogma or indoctrination (which we are so scared of we literally can't see straight). But as examples of successful lives lived by real people, whether it is Jesus or the Buddha, or George Washington or Winston Churchill, or Rosa Parks or Martin Luther King, or Betty Friedan or Faye Wattleton, or Noam Chomsky or Wendell Berry, or Lewis Thomas or Aldo Leopold. Why we don't have Chomsky lecturing on general topics, instead of just linguistics or foreign policy, is a mystery to me. Ralph Nader should be paid exorbitant amounts by Stanford or Yale to pass on everything he knows, not just his opinions about consumer issues. This country could use thousands of young people cut from his mold. Ditto for Wendell Berry. And Faye Wattleton. And many others.

Why don't we? Two reasons. First, because it would be bad for business. One Nader and one Chomsky is bad enough. Let those (truly) intellectual genes start to multiply, and some people are going to lose a lot of money. And this is where Kaczynski is right. Where he is justified (whether logically or morally is a question of semantics). Corporate control of government and education is a bad idea. Not because I say it is, or because I want it to be, but because it can be demonstrated to be to the satisfaction of any sane person.

And two, because we have mis-defined democracy. What we wanted was equal opportunity,

fairness, and a maximum of self-governance. But in dismantling false hierarchies, we have dismantled the real ones, too. The hierarchies that allow for teachers and mentors, for the passing on of knowledge. Teenagers now think they have hit the apex of wisdom at sixteen (or, a bestseller tells us we peaked at five). If we are all equal and truth is relative, what is there to learn anyway? Elders who would teach them this are not worthy of respect, and young people know it: and so the circle has become vicious.

There is a reason Chase's "educated elite" are uneasy. They are invested in a system they know to be wrong, and they don't have the courage to divest. They do nothing but read and write books (books that no one under thirty reads). But if violence is wrong, then the alternative is non-violent action. The alternative is to live your life differently. Don't work for the big company. Don't buy all the stuff. Don't vote for the jerks. Don't spend more time "making a living" than teaching yourself and your kids how to live. And talk to your neighbors: together you may find the courage to resist. The bottom line is, whatever needs to be done, do it yourself, as far as you can.

And one last thing. A writing style is a sign of the times. An argument, like Chase's, that moves from the specific to the abstract is both a mirror of helplessness and a cause of it. The universities and magazines need thinkers who can, with eloquence and erudition, move from the general to the specific, giving the student or reader an idea that something can be done.

*Platform*[The journal of the school of architecture, University of Texas], 1998

I just read the article on the Blanton [Museum] controversy in the most recent issue, and I was not surprised to find a one-sided argument. I suppose it is not up to you to supply your own refutation, but you might have given your readers a bit more insight into this disagreement. Page after page of describing your own heroics and the Regents' idiocy does little to establish your credibility to the outside world. But, I remind myself, for those in PoMo there is no outside world.

Just because those who disagree with you do not staple together signs and shout childish names at the news cameras does not mean that you go unopposed. I have always held the Regents in disdain, so do not think I am supporting their positions in criticizing yours. But it has always been unclear to me why the schools of architecture and art history felt this museum was theirs. From the very beginning they have simply assumed that the museum design would be avant garde, the more the better. The regents have not acted in a democratic manner, as you have said again and again. But have you? I don't remember any referendum or vote on this. Tony Sanchez' tastes have (rightly) been called into question. But why exactly should we discount his, but accept yours? I don't understand how his opinions are a matter of taste, but your opinions are not. I recommend that you don't bring "democracy" into it at all, if you want to win in the end. The Regents have an extreme concentration of power, it is true. But PoMo is only a tiny minority of self-interested folks as well, as this whole fiasco has shown. I do not believe that either Larry Speck or Jessie Otto Hite is representative of any majority in this city.

The truth is that Ms. Hite has put together a series of shows that no one, except a few academic insiders and aspiring art critics, wants to look at. The new Suida Manning collection brought a few folks to

campus, but even that has been oversold. Most of the work is fourth-rate leftovers that the real museums didn't want, or were too savvy to bid for way back when. And Jonathan Bober is probably the biggest phony west of the Mississippi. I personally will never return to the Blanton if only for fear of having to again listen to him talk about himself in stentorian tones. As for the contemporary art exhibitions: any audience participation is strictly charity work. All the museums in Austin have been force-feeding the public PoMo agitprop for twenty years. The "masses" are chided for being apathetic about art. But it is not that they are uninterested in art: they are uninterested in the empty conceptualizations that pass for art. How long can the academics continue to dismiss widespread disenchantment with PoMo as bourgeois narrowness or political recidivism? How long will they continue to preach "pluralism" and "inclusion" while appealing to no one but art theorists and the frontline of PC nebbishes?

The saddest thing in all this is that once again art is left out of the equation. You would think that art would be the primary concern with a museum. But when all this squabbling is over and the Blanton stands hugely and expensively on whatever site is chosen, it will stand largely empty of art. And it will stand completely empty of great contemporary art. Why? Because there is no great contemporary art. PoMo has killed it. The term "great," like the term "talent" or the term "beauty," is outdated. It is disallowed. It is hierarchic, and we want no more hierarchies, thank you. Theory itself has made "great art" an oxymoron. So Austin will have another building, probably no better and hopefully no worse than the Convention Center or the airport. It will have curators and directors and wealthy benefactors and corporate underwriters and art critics and architecture mavens, all congratulating each other for the good they have done art. Our custodians of art. But we will still not have any art.

Marilyn vos Savant, *Parade Magazine*, 2000.

Dear Marilyn,

This concerns your recent comments about art, music, and your personal philanthropic dreams. Know that someone agrees with you. I do not believe that art is dead or that there is any historical necessity for being where we are. Fine things are still possible. That they are not actual is an institutional and societal failure, the causes of which are complex and deeply rooted. That there are causes is not say that we might not have chosen differently, or might not now choose differently.

Your belief that someone needs to create new art institutions is correct. But we need schools more than museums, since the money we now spend on museums is wasted on avant garde installations and other political posturing. The sad truth is that there is almost no one left to teach in these schools, even if we finance them. The tradition has been cut for so long and to such a depth that it will be very difficult to rebuild. The deconstruction has been so successful, that is, that reconstruction becomes quite a problem. There may not be enough yeast left to leaven the loaf.

Nor is there a consensus that anything needs to be done. Most of those who agree with you simply don't care enough even to say so, much less do anything. Except for those few in the business, art is not a priority. And the apologists for Modernism remain entrenched and very powerful. The universities are monolithically postmodern, as is the market and the media. Modernism is controlled by non-artist dealers, curators and critics, mostly in NYC. Art is defined by theory alone, which allows these people to suppress opposition. Art that requires no explanation or marketing, that bypasses the need for the priests of Modernism, is a danger to them, and they will be very difficult to dislodge. Some "decorative" markets remain, for florals and cowboys and such things, it is true. But this is no sign of hope. Most the great art of the past would be disallowed in either the modern or the decorative markets now. It would have too much skill and sincerity for the former, too much emotion and content for the latter.

Your opinion of Picasso is also sound, and is unlikely to change, no matter what you read or see. His Blue and Rose periods are charming and poignant. Almost everything else is directed at critics, and is only fodder for writers. He admitted this himself. He was mainly interested in fame. He was not proud of *Guernica*, which the Spanish socialists pressured him to paint. His first canvas on the subject was a nude of his lover Dora Maar. When the socialists protested, he produced another painting in a matter of days and allowed them to take it unfinished. He said, "Finished or not, get it out of here!" The rest of his career can be seen in much the same light. Travel if you like, and read to know the truth, but be prepared to increase your cynicism rather than to discover new depths in contemporary art. There are none.

Democratic solutions have also failed. Some have attacked the avant grade as elitists, hoping for an alliance with the people. Unfortunately, it has been found that this sort of alliance doesn't bolster the art one wants it to. It may bolster Hollywood and pop music, but does nothing for poetry or sculpture or painting. Really fine art is exceptional, by definition. By one sense of the word, it *is* elitist. It is produced by the best artists, who are of course elite. Although one would think this idea is commonsense, it is not therefore easy to generalize it. Most people now are offended by any elitism, and sense is no longer common. And most people do not prefer Elvira Madigan to Elvis.

One would think that a margin must exist somewhere: opera goers who wanted to hear new operas of quality, classically trained musicians who wanted to play or compose something new and beautiful, collectors of old master paintings who also wanted new masters, young artists who ignored the market. But it doesn't. Most of the opera mavens and art collectors care no more about art than the pilgrims at Graceland. They are in it for the investment or the society. Those few who do love art apparently do not also feel a concern for art history. They have been convinced that it is over, and that is that. Those who have money believe they don't have anyone to give it to, and most of those who love art don't have money.

If you had to give to individuals rather than to institutions, could you find great poets or painters or sculptors or classical composers? Most people can't. Philanthropists rely on foundations. But the



foundations do not have lists either. They underwrite the sort of fake artists you criticize. The whole system is broken, even where money exists. And it is broken on purpose, to benefit the fakes and phonies. The only way around this is for art lovers to support art directly. Nothing else will work. We need direct patronage, not foundations and corporate sponsorship. And we need apprenticeship, not schools or other new institutions administered by non-artists.

I am very grateful to see you broach these subjects in your column. You can expect to continue to be browbeaten by the "experts" in the field you are "encroaching" upon as an "amateur." But always remember who is attacking you. They are not artists or even amateurs, since they love nothing but money and fame. They are infinitely more self-interested than you are, though they will loudly claim the opposite.

As a "brainy" artist, I have long been a target for all the brickbats now being thrown at you. An intellectual is expected to paint *as* an intellectual. One is not allowed to show off as a draughtsman or technician, but one must show off as a progressive, a cynic, a theorist, an innovator, a provider of the required agitprop. When my work is first seen, I am assumed to be stupid. When it is discovered I am not, I am then assumed to be unaware. When it is discovered I am not, I am then assumed to be neo-conservative. And so on. I think you may have the same sort of guns leveled at you. You passed directly to unaware, since your IQ is not in question. The pressure will increase on you the more you know and care. And if you have any success in promoting your views, prepare for the ante to be upped.

You will be subjected to lots of literature from the opposition. Material in support of your own view is not so easy to find. If you would like some help in discovering it, I am at your service. I have lots of tasty quotes from history that are not common knowledge anymore. In defending the rights of my limbic system or my Id, I have made a warrior of my neocortex; and you may be interested to hear that the ego can be quite protective of the sub-conscious. That is, reason can argue for passion just as persuasively as it has argued against it.

I have included a photo or two of my work. You have an ally: not a very potent ally yet, but an earnest one. And you may be interested to see exactly what is being ignored in favor of sharks in tanks and strings hanging from the ceiling.

*Daily Texan*, University of Texas, Austin, 1998.

Regarding the announcement of the new art museum on campus, I feel compelled to point out that what I said in *XL* magazine about the Austin Museum of Art's plans for a large civic museum apply to the Blanton Museum as well. The money of these wealthy people would be better spent in founding or encouraging art schools that teach painting and sculpture, or in creating commissions for talented living artists, or in employment counseling for art critics and administrators. Building another ugly and expensive dungeon may pad the bank account of some talentless architect and employ x number of

curators and get everyone's names in the paper, but it won't do anything for art. The HRC and the Michener Collection are already a vast advertisement for non-art, and I doubt we need anymore wallspace where Hoffmann and Gottlieb and Rothko can rot. I appreciate Mr. Michener's and Mr. Rappoport's and Mr. Blanton's desire to patronize the arts, but the current channels are so corrupted that benefactors can no longer assume benefaction. Until the postmoderns and their formalism, Dadaism, Futurism, and pseudopolitics are ousted from visual art, every dollar is just another brick in the wall.

*The Horsefly*, Taos, May 2009

I have read two "reviews" of Hopper at the Harwood from you now, in April and May, and have yet to hear a substantive word. No reviewing is done, just a lot of vaporous quoting of Dave Hickey about culture in general. Of course you can't address the actual art, since it is so trifling. But even your comments about culture are meaningless or false. I was especially struck by this one from the April "review": *Collectively, sports stars and celebrities have slightly less status than cocktail waitresses or pit bosses*. What a load of horse manure: when do cocktail waitresses or pit bosses have the chance to buy themselves a show at the museum? This show at the Harwood is all about celebrity, as is obvious to anyone awake. Do you imagine that people are actually going to see the "art"? No, they are hoping to run into someone famous.

And I can't understand why self-styled "progressives" are giving Hopper a pass here, giving him free promotion without the least attempt at criticism. Remember, Hopper has been a Republican for decades, ever since the Duke squeezed all his skin-deep principles out of him by laughing at him back in the 70's. Yes, he says he voted for Obama, but only because he didn't like Palin. Not because he was against the wars in Afghanistan or Iraq, not because he was appalled at the lies surrounding 9/11, not because he was against the Patriot Acts or the Military Tribunals or the torture commissions, but because he didn't want a woman to be vice-president. Hopper isn't progressive in any way. He is a huge phony. And his art is crap.

Taos doesn't need a "summer of love". It needs a "summer of getting its head out of its ass." It needs a summer of learning not to fall prostrate at every sliver of propaganda that comes down the pike, whether it is about politics or art.

*Taos News*, May 2009

I find it sad that in this town of supposed diversity we hear no counter-opinion to the chamber of commerce boosterism and art propaganda that is already deafening, before the summer has even started. To limit myself here to art, I have seen and heard lots of free promotion by the media for Dennis Hopper and his buddies, but absolutely no attempt at real review or criticism. Even the alternative press has chosen to fall at the feet of the returning celebrities. Is everyone really entranced by

the art at the Harwood? Do people still have eyes, in this town of a thousand "artists"? It is hard to tell, since we never hear a word in the press about the actual art. It is all a nebulous cultural paeon to nothing, a maudlin, star-kissing bow to power and money, while mouthing meaningless words about democracy and progress. Dave Hickey is quoted from the catalog, rattling on about nothing, but we never see a picture of any of the artworks. This is understandable, since if the public knew what they were going to see beforehand, they would never bother to pay the entry fee. I will close with a reminder to all the critic-wannabes in town: an art review should review the art, otherwise it is indistinguishable from agitprop.

To the Editor, *Taos News*, August 6, 2009

Re: "Provocateur", Virginia Clark, August 6 cover story, *Tempo Magazine*. First we are told that 900 people have seen the current exhibit at the Harwood, curated by Dennis Hopper. That number is sold to us as high, but it is actually pathetically low. If we do the math, we find that is about 300 a month (since May), or 10 a day. That is statistically negligible. More people enter buildings by accident than that. If we assume the number has been padded by the artists and their moms and the cleaning staff, we get down to about 1 or 2 strangers a day who lurched in looking for a public toilet, were button-holed by the curator and given complimentary free admission, and lurched out again moments later, blinking and gagging.

Then we are told that "national celeb" Dave Hickey has "taken to task" various forms of "academic nonsense." First of all, no one but a few pale, confused, nebbish insiders have heard of Hickey, which makes him somewhat less than a celeb. Second, it is logically impossible to combat academic nonsense with more nonsensical nonsense. Hickey "staunchly advocates for beauty unbound by content or objective criteria." That is just flapdoodle, since beauty has to mean something. It is a word, and a word unbound by content or objective criteria is just a floating gassiness, like everything else that comes from Hickey's bloated head. Hickey thinks that the market for non-critical art in Taos is "incredibly stupid," so we know who he is arguing against, but the problem is who he is arguing for. Hickey is supposed to be arguing for beauty, is supposed to be "antimodernist" in some way, but he is completely modern in his choice of pals, here and elsewhere. Although he is from Fort Worth, not exactly the metropolitan center of the universe, he now wants to be seen as a big-city celeb, talking down to the ignorant "provincials." But his elevation is all fake and manufactured, since the shows he curates and the people he promotes create nothing of beauty. They offer us "snot on suede" as "beauty unbound by content." They sit on panels and slap each other on the back. Hickey is a man without artistic credentials. The Muses choke on his very aura.

As a real provocateur, I ask why the public museum has been coopted by these fake people and their fake shows and their fake catalogs? Why has the town's newspaper decided to print their airy propaganda and self-glorification, unedited and unanalyzed?

To the Editor, *Taos News*, September 11, 2009

First of all, I got my number [900] straight from the Harwood Museum's own reporter, so IF the number is wrong, it is their mistake not mine. But I find it convenient that they can change the number whenever they need to. If I make fun of the new number, will they just make up a third higher number? I notice that page 29 of that week's *Tempo Magazine* [August 6] has been removed from the web, as the first step in rewriting history. Second, I had called the Hickey audience "pale, nebbish and confused" and Frank Bergman from Dallas wrote in to prove he is not pale or nebbish by mentioning his military record—although we are not sure what the military has to do with art. We must assume he is just wrapping himself in the flag, as Hickey [so often does](#). Bergman may or may not have a military tan (we would need a recent photo to verify that), but he only proves himself confused when he says he can't find me online. He must be using some new military search engine, since Google returns hundreds of entries when I type in my name, and many of these are pertinent to his question of credentials.

# A Few Real Secrets of Drawing

*and other thoughts*

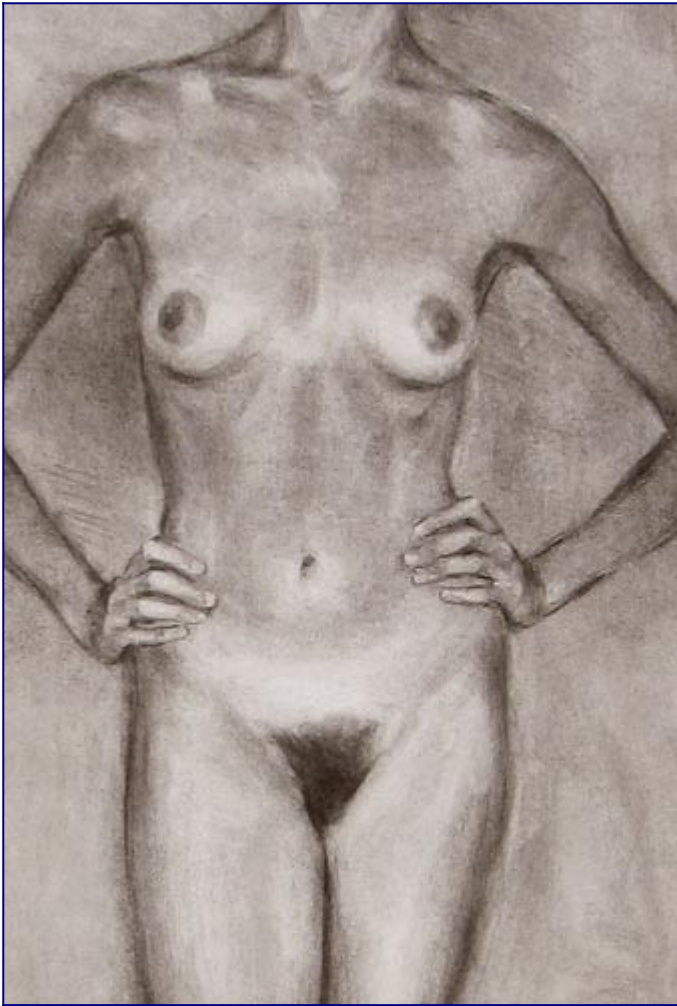
*by Miles Mathis*



The demand for perfection is always a sign  
of a misunderstanding of the ends of art.—*Ruskin*

In returning to the Hockney debate recently, I was reminded how many misconceptions still persist about drawing. In my opinion, a lot of the content of the Hockney debate is manufactured from nothing: that is to say, it is little more than lies. But let me give everyone the benefit of the doubt for a moment and assume that some of the mistakes are just misconceptions. They are errors, not lies.

One of these persistent errors is the claim that it is more difficult to draw from life than from photos. There are lots of good arguments for drawing and painting from life, and I have made them myself, but I have never argued for life because it is harder. In some ways it is harder, in some ways it is easier. As I show you the ways to make it easier to work from life and from photos, I will run down the various differences, so that you will have an honest account of both methods.



A longstanding belief, held by many artists in the past and present as well as many connoisseurs and scholars, is that drawing from the photo is easier because the photo is already in two dimensions. They will say that the main hardship in drawing from life is that you have to transfer from three dimensions to two. This argument makes some sense, and I held to it myself for a long time. But it doesn't hold up under scrutiny. We now know that the brain sees the world in two dimensions and then recreates the third dimension using after-the-fact knowledge of various kinds. What you are seeing, cast upon your retina, is a picture, a *two-dimensional* image, very much like a picture inside a camera. Yes, the brain works like a fancy camera, remember? Of course you have two eyes and therefore two images, and the brain uses both images to create depth, as most people also know. But the brain creates depth with other tricks, like shadow analysis and color analysis and so on. That is why the brain gets tricked sometimes. The brain is not given a 3-D image, it is creating one.

The image you see right now, whatever it is, is a 2-D image. That is why babies reach for the Moon, bump their heads very often, and so on. Their images haven't completely jelled, as far as dimensions go. As we get older, both our hands and our brains *learn* the third dimension.

Conversely, when we look at a photograph, we are building the third dimension there, too. The brain treats the photograph just like life, and adds the third dimension in the same way. That is why people sometimes mistake photographs and paintings for real people. In the first instance, the brain cannot differentiate between a photo and life. If you can't see that the photo is a photo, by finding a back to it or a border or a fault in it, you have no other way of knowing it is not life. The brain reads both in the same way.

This must mean that when you are painting from life, you are transferring two dimensions to two dimensions. There is no dimensional difference; therefore if painting from life is harder, it must be harder for other reasons.

Now, it *is* harder in some ways, as I said, but the difficulty is not one of dimensions. It is mainly a lack of a border. What helps with a photograph is that you have a rectilinear border near the image you are drawing. A large part of making a correct drawing is achieving all the right distances and slants in the image, and the border is the most important tool you have in helping your brain to see these distances and slants. In the first place, the vertical border of the photo acts as a sort of plumb bob, giving you the vertical hook you need to read all the slants in the picture. Your brain compares each slant of each line in the image to the border, and tells you immediately how much each line is leaning relative to that vertical border. To a lesser degree, the brain does the same thing with the horizontal border.



Armed with this simple knowledge, you can use it to make drawing from both life and the photo much easier. Let's apply it to life, to begin with. In drawing from life, you have an image without a border. For



this reason, all the slants in the image have no real hook. It can be very difficult to find your vertical hook, which is why artists use a plumb bob. They are looking for the vertical foundation of the image, so that they can compare all their main lines to it. Much better than a plumb bob is a frame. You may have seen artists using these in movies about Old Masters and wondered what the heck is going on. I believe I remember Vincent using one in *Vincent and Theo*. These artists are looking through a little frame, either with a grid or without, in order to impose a structure on this borderless image. By far the most important thing in this frame is the vertical border, which acts as the hook of the entire image transfer in the brain.

You will have seen many artists misusing these devices as well, since in the movies they often seem to be handheld. But it is crucial that the frame not move relative to the image. You have to fix the frame firmly, and then fix yourself relative to it and the image. If either you or it move, the angles are destroyed and the tool becomes a hindrance.

It is quite easy to make one of these devices, and no one could call such a device a cheat--since it just gives you a border. To make one, first set up your life model or still life just the way you want them. Then set up your easel at a proper distance from the scene, so that you see the whole image and a bit more. Then, set up a second easel between you and the scene, nearer you than the scene. Put an empty frame on this easel, of your chosen dimensions, either square or rectangular, either horizontal or vertical. Move the frame a bit to one side or the other, to get it away from the center post of the second easel. Then adjust the height and tilt of the second easel until the frame is in the right place. Make sure the frame is flat with regard to you (it does not have to be flat with regard to the scene). In other words, all four corners of the frame should be equidistant from your eye, when you are standing or seated at your easel.

Voila! You have created a photo to work from. As long as your model does not move, your drawing will be as easy to create as a drawing done from a photo.

Of course this is to admit that one of the difficulties of drawing or painting from life is that models do *not* sit still. You have to keep firm control of your model. A good trick in doing that is to fix a piece of mat board or something behind her while you are painting her head. The head is the most likely to move, and it is the thing most likely to matter, if it does move. Just get her set and then make some marks on the mat board that you can see from your easel. I usually make one mark at the highest point of her crown (to keep her from slouching) and one mark at her nose. Those are enough, usually, but you can make as many marks as you like. Once you get your drawing set on your own canvas or paper, you can remove the mat board. Or, if she is especially slouchy, you can leave it there to keep her honest.



We have similar methods to help you with drawing from photos. I never use projection, calipers, or grids, but I often use photos. Unless I am working on a really big painting, I normally use the standard 6 or 7 inch prints you can get from the drugstore. There is plenty of detail in those, enough for all but the fussiest. But it isn't the size of the photo that is of primary importance. Use whatever size feels right for your brain. The primary importance of the photo is that you use it correctly. The first thing to know is that photos add contrast and distort color. So you need low contrast film or a low contrast setting on a digital camera. Then you need to spend some time getting the color right. The first processing will not do it. You almost always have to send the important photos back to the lab and have them tweaked to suit your purposes. Tourists and other non-artists like very orange photos, so your lab will probably send you oversaturated photos leaning heavily to the red. Tell them you want low contrast, low saturation images, and you want to see blue in every image, even if it is an image of a tangerine in a yellow bowl. After a while they will know how to satisfy you.

By the same token, if you are using a digital camera, you have to learn to use photoshop. You have to make the proper corrections to match the photo to life. You are making the tweaks the lab used to make. Many artists get cute in photoshop and start adding saturation and contrast and so on, but you should avoid this. You want to push the photo as close to life as you can, and that is all. Save your interpretation for when you have a pencil or brush in your hand. Overusing photoshop is a small form of cheating, and it is counterproductive anyway. It will tend to make your paintings look fake and modern, like a *Shrek* still or a CGI monstrosity instead of like a rich Old Master painting.

This is one reason that working from life is actually easier than working from photos. In life you have correct colors and correct saturation and correct contrast. You don't have to make any corrections. You just paint what is there. With even the best photos, you have to push the contrast lower, push the color balance, and search for middletones. You have to look hard for green and blue in the skin and play

down the oranges. You cannot hope to do this in the right way unless you have also done a lot of work from life. You cannot know what is wrong with a photo without knowing what is right about life.

The next thing to be fussy about is the cropping. Don't bother the lab with cropping, just tell them to print everything full frame. You do the cropping at home, with scissors or a straight edge. In cropping, don't just consider the parts of the image you want to include, consider the fact that all your edges are being used by your brain to read the image. Meaning, use those vertical edges like a plumb bob. If the image is not balanced, if people are leaning a bit, straighten them up with your trim.

Now, once you have your photo, you are only halfway there. You still have to use it. I have seen more students go wrong here than any other place. It is very important that you affix it very near your paper or canvas, and it is very important that the verticals align. You cannot hold the photo in your hand, allow it to shift all over your drawing board, or affix it so that it moves. You have to get it in the right place and it has to be rock solid.

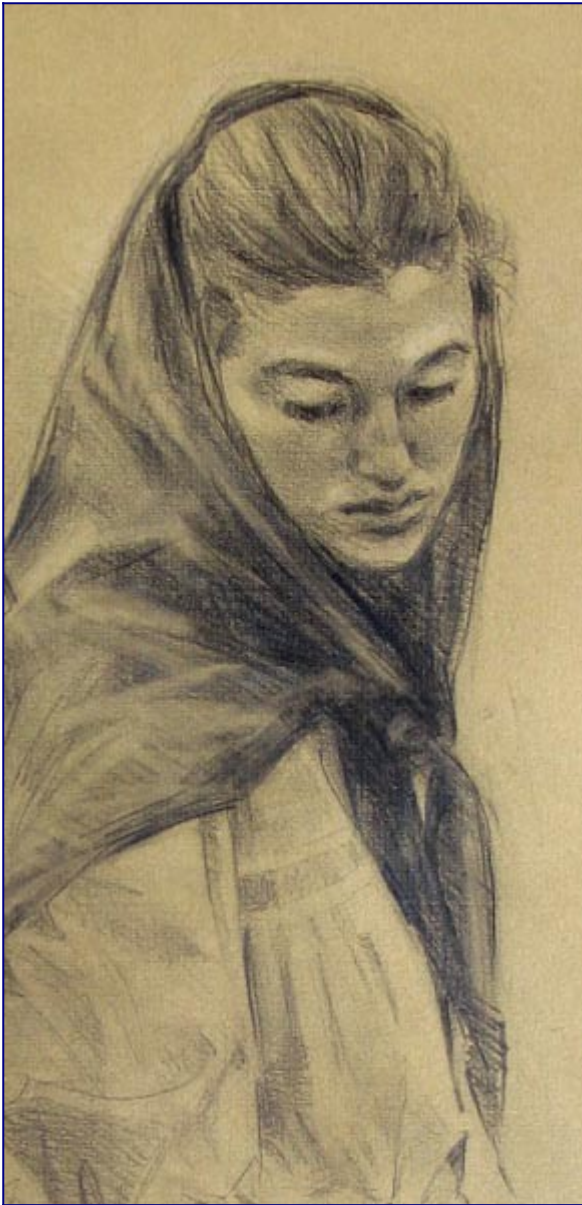


What is the right place? If you are right handed, the right place is probably to the left of your paper; if you are left handed, the right place is probably to the right of your paper. But if this feels very

awkward, do what feels good. It may be that you are ambidextrous to some weird degree, and there are no hard and fast rules here. More important is the height at which you affix the photo, relative to your drawing. You want to affix the photo so that you only have to transfer the image in one direction. You don't want to have to transfer the image in your head two directions, because that just makes things harder for no reason. Since your photo is unlikely to be the same size as your drawing, you will say it is very hard to affix the photo so that it is transferred in only one direction, but there are two ways to do it. One, line up the center of the photo with the center of the drawing. This gives you an average transfer in only one direction. Or, if you are drawing a head, you can line up the eyes. This is what I do. This makes the transfer easier, since the eyes are an even more important hook than the center of the head.

Needless to say, it is also very important that the photo and the drawing are on the same plane. You cannot have your painting on an easel and the photo on a table. Nor should you have the painting on one easel, and the photo on another one, unless the two easels are at precisely the same tilt. Ideally, you should have the photo as close to the painting as possible, preferably taped right to the canvas. This is what I do.

This brings us to another difficulty of painting from life. I often see people trying to paint from life from a drafting table, a watercolorist's easel (horizontal) or a tilted easel. If you are very talented it can be done, but it adds another variable to the transfer, another difficulty for your brain. You want to make things as easy as possible, and the way to do this is to put your canvas in the same plane as the scene you are drawing. In other words, it is best if your easel has no tilt at all, or only enough tilt to account for your height. If you are looking down at your model or scene, then this is a reason to have some tilt, but otherwise you should have your easel very near straight up. You would be amazed at how many people have never considered this.



Using these methods, you should find drawing in any circumstance a bit easier. But if you still have difficulty, please realize that using rulers, calipers, or grids is not considered cheating by anyone, and never has been. I don't use them because I don't find them useful, but I don't look down my nose at anyone who does use them. Personally, I think grids can get in the way, and limit the freedom of the line, but some artists have used them without ill effect.

What of projection? I consider projection bad for two reasons. One, it is cheating. If you are working from a projected image, you aren't drawing, you are tracing. Every first grader knows that. And for the record, I would rank camera lucidas and camera obscuras with projectors. If they were used to create images to trace, they were cheats. But even more important is that projection destroys all character in a drawing. If the hand isn't free to move as it wants, to some degree, the drawing can't have any character in it. Drawings and paintings done by projection look like drawings done by computers: they

have no emotion. What most people don't understand is that you don't *want* your drawing to be absolutely correct, you don't want a precise verisimilitude, because precise verisimilitude is photography, not art. Art must contain a degree of interpretation. A good artist makes interesting mistakes, and a great artist makes great mistakes. Art is pushing an image in beautiful or poignant ways, and the best mistakes are not done consciously.

For this reason, it is best to give yourself some leeway. You can demand precision early on, as a sort of practice, but eventually you will have to dispense with this attachment to precision for its own sake. If you are too attached to precision, you will not leave a large enough gap in your technique for the entry of character. Likewise with projection. An artist who uses projection can't get any better, past a certain point. He or she will always be attached to the projector, as with an umbilical cord, and the push toward real art will be limited because the push toward interpretation will be limited.

Some people say the same of photography, but this is not true. If you are drawing from a photo freehand, you are no more limited in your interpretation than if you are drawing from life. Your hand is free to wander, if it likes. There are only two real dangers of using photos. One, if you aren't careful, you may disconnect from life by forgetting what true color balance and contrast is. Two, you may disconnect from life because you never work with real people or things. In this case, your interpretation becomes cold and clinical, and all your objects, even people, look objectified, like meat on a cold slab.

But painting from life has similar dangers. Artists who paint solely from life can go off track for countless reasons. They see so many colors, even in skin, that they may fall in love with color for its own sake. They begin to over-saturate everything and soon their paintings look like Disneyland reconstructions. Or perhaps, due to the limitations of what can be painted easily from life, they drift into a stilted nowhere land of wooden poses and lazy models, with nothing but reclining figures and drapes and piled bric-a-brac.

But let us return to projection, since this is what the Hockney debate centered on. [I have shown in no uncertain terms that Hockney was wrong](#), but that does not mean that artists in the past didn't use projection. The novelty of my position in the Hockney debate is that I can show he is wrong while at the same time admitting that some artists may have used projection. The reason for this is that Hockney's thesis isn't and never was that projection existed in the past. His thesis always was that projection explained the giant advances in naturalism around the time of the Renaissance, and that it explained the optical qualities of many great realists, like Van Eyck and Caravaggio and Ingres. This thesis is not just demonstrably false, it is absurd. We know what paintings done with the use of projectors look like: entire galleries in New York City are filled with this photorealism. Projected images now account for a large part of the realist market, in all genres. None of them look the least bit like a Van Eyck, a Caravaggio, or an Ingres. They all look much flatter and much less complex.

We don't have to return to the 15<sup>th</sup> century to disprove Hockney's thesis, and this is another reason the debates have been so absurd. We can go no further back than Sargent, a hundred years ago, when we have lots of documentation and eye-witness accounts. We have clear evidence of Sargent's methods, from his models and colleagues, and there is no indication he routinely used projection, or even photos.

If you are using a projector, you don't need 85 sittings with a child, as he had with Marie-Louise Pailleron. They were both so relieved when it was over they threw the furniture out the windows. What does this prove? Well, we only have to prove one artist could paint that well without projection to disprove Hockney's thesis. If Sargent could do it, then so could a thousand others, and if they could do it without projection, then projection was not the cause of the advance, or the cause of anyone's career. For Hockney to be correct, ALL the great realist painters had to be using projection, not just one or two. If we can show even one painter of high realism who did not use projection, then Hockney must explain where his ability came from. Again, Hockney has claimed that lenses and projectors were the cause of the advance, and if that is so, then no artist should have been able to advance without the cause. If you have some artists advancing without the cause, then the cause is not the cause.

In the few times that Hockney has been pushed on this, he has retreated to the nebulous idea that ability is a culture-wide phenomenon. Maybe Van Eyck used a projector and Memling didn't, but Memling learned from Van Eyck's use, for instance. This means something like, if I use a sharper razor, you also get a closer shave. If I buy a bigger bed, you sleep in greater comfort. If I eat two pies for dessert, everybody in the world gets fat.

So you can see how it is. Vermeer's use of a tool, whatever it may be, cannot have any effect on Sargent's hand-eye coordination centuries later. Hockney claims that these tools "changed the way we see," but there can be no evidence of that. These lenses and tools didn't change the way sculptors saw, since sculptors have always had to deal with the third dimension. Where did Michelangelo's talent come from? Did Michelangelo's ability leap onto him during a shower with Perugino? Before Hockney came along, we were taught that Michelangelo's technical inspiration came from Greek and Roman statuary. Sculptors were producing very real sculptures at least by the time of Praxiteles. Does Hockney mean to imply that the Greeks were also projecting, and that the projecting was rubbing off from the painters onto the sculptors, in 400BC?

But enough of that. Hockney was as full of holes as a sponge to begin with, and I have long since squeezed him dry. What of projection now? We know it is pandemic in the modern markets, both in realism and in the avant garde. What are its effects? I have already shown that one effect is a flat, unenriched, emotionless, and characterless image. This is its artistic effect. But its effect in the market is to create mass confusion among the buyers and aficionados. Most normal people can't seem to tell the difference between a work from a projection and a work not from a projection. They can't tell the difference between a mediocre drawing and a good drawing, or the difference between a poorly painted head and a head that is alive and breathing. To make matters worse, they get no help from most quarters. In fact, they get the opposite of help: they get marketing.

Everyone knows that tracing is cheating, so almost no one wants to admit to it. A majority of realists are using projection, and a majority of that majority is lying about it. Everybody claims to be working from life, although, as I have shown, working from life is no proof of anything. I have seen terrible paintings done from life, terrible paintings done from photos, and terrible paintings done from projection. The difference is, I have never seen a great painting done by projection. I have seen some paintings from projection that were amazingly realistic, but that is not the same thing.



When you get a confluence of dishonest artists and ill-informed clients, it can't help but corrupt the market. The clients can't tell who really has talent for drawing, since a lot of marginally talented people can create realistic images with projection. And they can't tell who has a talent for expression, because the realist market has been divorced from expression for decades. The market split years ago: accuracy went to the realist market and expression went to the avant garde. If your line becomes expressive now in realism, people think you don't know how to draw. If Corot entered the contemporary realist market, he would be dismissed as a clutz.

In other words, the clients rarely have any taste or education, and the artists and galleries prefer to keep them that way. It is much easier to sell to people with bad judgment. This fact was first discovered and mined by the avant garde, and it has devolved to the point where rich people will pay millions for silkscreens of Marilyn Monroe or for piles of rocks. But it is also true in realism. Most people don't know how to look at a painting, they don't want anyone to tell them how to look at a painting, and they don't want to read a book to discover it for themselves. They just want to make a purchase.

To make matters even worse, most contemporary books mis-educate viewers by telling them they should have "critical distance" or that they should deconstruct everything or that they should read the blurbs or that they should listen to critics or audiotapes. They never get told why one Old Master painting is better than another one, based on an artistic reading. So reading books and articles is most often counterproductive.

Obviously, you can't make artists stop using projectors and you can't make artists tell the truth. You can't shut critics or art historians up, and you can't prohibit physicists and computer scientists and social workers and propagandists from blabbing endlessly about things they know nothing about. You also can't, in most cases, educate rich people. This appears to make the situation hopeless. The only crack in this armor is that some people with enough money to buy art do have the ability to look at a painting. Some of them have a natural eye, some of them have studied somewhere, somehow, something besides Dada and the Bauhaus, and some of them are eager to learn. We are at a low point in history, and there is no denying it, but even now the possibility of a patron lives on.

*Lindy*



*pastel*  
*16 x 11 in.*

# THE 70 TOP LOVE SONGS

*by Miles Mathis*

I decided to revisit my [Best Song list](#), varying it a bit to achieve a Best Love Song list. Why? Oh, I don't know, decompression from all my serious papers on science and art and the Buddha and so on. And I read some other lists on the internet, which is always enough to get me going. Plus, I feel pretty well-qualified to put together a list like this, since I have always been a sucker for sappy love songs. As you could tell from reading my critique of [Tom Waits](#), I have never been too concerned with appearing to be cool. In fact, I make a conscious effort to avoid being cool, as many around me are painfully aware. In the same way, I make a conscious effort to avoid toothpastes that might make my teeth too white, since I want to avoid looking like the soulless mannequins around me. In the same way, I cut my own hair, to make sure I look nothing like the coiffed phonies on TV and in suits. In short, I resist the future like a fatal disease, since that is, in fact, what it is.

This qualifies me to compile a love songs list, since cool people avoid love songs on principle. Basically, love songs aren't cool. They are for teenage girls and other culture morons, it is thought. That is why you never see them on lists from those supercool sims at *Rolling Stone* and places like that. But I was born with a big squishy hole in the middle of my chest, and it hasn't firmed up over the years. I liked John Denver when I was 12, and you know what, I still like John Denver. I used to sing along with Olivia Newton-John when I was ten, and you know what, if my voice was still that high, I still would. I don't think this makes me a culture moron. In my very educated opinion, it makes YOU a culture moron (supposing you disagree with me). It makes you a hard-shelled, dried-up, jaded old adult. If that is what you want to be, go for it, but I have no desire to join you. I have no desire to grow up and become a boring old modern adult, one who listens to bad music and looks at bad art on purpose just to show how tough they are. I have no desire to drink foul-tasting martinis or smoke nasty cigarettes or have ink injected into my skin or wear uncomfortable clothes, just so I can be an ugly adult. If that makes me Tom Hanks in *Big* (remember when he spit out the cavier?), fine. I can live with that. I do live like that very well.

That said, I tend to feel sorry for teenage girls and for Peter Pans much younger than me, since the quality of sappy love songs has gone straight to hell in the past 30 years. My sugary innards were formed in the 70's, the apex of love songs. I was spoiled by the songwriting skills of Don Henley and James Taylor and Carol King and Joni Mitchell and John Denver and Jim Croce and David Gates and many more. And I was only a few years past the peaks of the Beatles and Paul Simon and the Zombies and the Association and the Hollies and the Beach Boys and so on.

These days, if you want a love song you have to listen to a bad remake of one of these old songs by

some plastic gay Baptist choirboy like Clay Aiken or by some fake whore like Vanessa Hudgens. Either that or you have to listen to a synthesized watered-down piece of garbage by ex-NSync mousketeers or by New Country Neuters like Rascal Flatts. And instead of having real people write songs, we now have committees of cyborgs programmed by Disney or the Nashville Chemical Corp. Robots with cowboy boots surgically attached to their limbs or with soul patches tied on with filaments. I don't think they work with guitars or even with mixing boards anymore. They now work with computers, just feeding in all the old melodies of the past 50 years and hoping the program can detect a new combination.

Young people now have to feed their spirits on horribly sung Madonna tunes, written by PDiddy or somebody in about five minutes in between blowjobs. It's pathetic the kind of things that you find on the these best-of lists now. Just look at the first 12 spots on the VH1 list:

(1) I will Always Love You—Whitney Houston

Love me Tender—Elvis Presley

My Heart will go on—Celine Dion

Open Arms—Journey

Maybe I'm Amazed—Paul McCartney

Unchained Melody—Righteous Brothers

Endless Love—Lionel Richie/Diana Ross

Your Song—Elton John

I'll be There—The Jackson 5

I Don't Wanna Miss a Thing—Aerosmith

At Last—Etta James

How Deep is Your Love?—Bee Gees

Let's see. Not all of these are bad. Unchained Melody is fine. Not the greatest love song, really—a bit over the top, even for me, but the Righteous Brothers sing the hell out of it, and I include it on my list. Same of the Bee Gees. Not the deepest lyrics, but the songwriting is superb and the instrumentals even better. It really creates a mood. One of the best slowdance lovesongs ever. Etta James I also don't have a problem with. This doesn't make my list because it fails one of my criteria (more on that later), but it is a great song.

But five of these choices are real stinkers, and I can't understand how they could make anyone's top ten. We will start with Whitney Houston. I have to turn the radio off when stuff like this comes on, to keep my epilepsy from onset. Whitney oversings this to incredible degrees, and I think she is one of the first ones to bring in that annoying habit of never actually hitting a note. She and Mariah Carey. They have to skat on every single note, so that you feel you are listening to about ten songs all performed at once. Performing ten songs at once is an amazing feat, somewhat like painting ten paintings all on the same canvas at the same time, or like playing the trumpet with your feet while typing out Shakespeare and gargling golfballs, but I don't want to have to listen to it. Besides, Whitney is just a front for corporate

singing. She didn't write that song and doesn't do a good job of convincing anyone she did. She could be singing it in German or Japanese (or both at the same time) and it wouldn't make any difference. Dolly Parton wrote it, and sings it herself with a bit of spirit. But Whitney sings it like she is auditioning for some themepark. Whitney turns Dolly's ball of harmless fluff into a hunk of scary plastic.

The same can be said for Celine Dion. She doesn't write this stuff, some committee of computer programmers who never had a date wrote it. After they write it, they digitize, vaccinate it, implant a RFID chip in it, and insure it. They then bring it up to very high temperatures, as a form of pasteurization, to be sure any remaining germs of humanness are killed. It is then shipped directly to stores on refrigerated trucks, where it is sold at gunpoint.

Endless Love is also a pre-packaged piece of aural dystopia, too sugary by far for any normal sweet tooth. It is like putting sugar in rootbeer. It is made for people who add espresso to their Jolt Cola. Duets never work, and it because nobody believes these people actually care for each other. The whole idea is too fake, on the face of it, to pass the fiction test. You can't suspend disbelief. And even if you can, because you are still 12 or something, even then you should be able to hear that this song just isn't as good as many, many others. If you really have to put it on your list for some reason, be a doll and put it down in the 90's or something. Placing it at number 7 is a tragedy. Yes, this "Love Songs" list is a list of sap, but you have to learn to differentiate one sap from another. There are levels of quality in everything, and you shouldn't rank saccharin next to honey or maple syrup. If you like really sweet and kitschy duets, try Suddenly by Cliff Richard and Olivia Newton-John. It is much better than its more famous cousins.

Then we have Journey and Aerosmith, included so that VH1 can think it is satisfying a somewhat wider demographic. I have news for VH1: it isn't satisfying any demographic, since everyone can see this is a committee list. It makes no sense. To satisfy anyone, you have to pick a point of view and stick with it. At least then you will only piss off a certain percentage of people. With committee lists, you piss off everybody.

I have a problem with other songs, and we will look at the top ten from another list (New York Daily News) to address that.

(10) I Can't Stop Loving You – Ray Charles  
Michelle – The Beatles  
Are You Lonesome Tonight? – Elvis Presley  
The First Time Ever I Saw Your Face – Roberta Flack  
In My Life – The Beatles  
You Are So Beautiful – Joe Cocker  
I Just Called to Say I Love You – Stevie Wonder  
Wonderful Tonight – Eric Clapton

I'll Be There – The Jackson 5  
(1) My Girl – The Temptations

My Girl is a great song, but I don't really consider it a love song. It's too abstract. Love is specific, and a love song needs to be specific. A love song isn't just about love, or about the opposite sex, it is about a certain person you are in love with. This is why Etta James' song failed to qualify. She is glad to be in love at last, but that doesn't exactly make her guy get goosebumps, does it? She seems more in love with love than with her particular man. In the same way, the Temptations' song is unlikely to put any girl in the mood. It's a happy song, which is nice, but it isn't what anyone would call lovey-dovey. Same for I'll Be There: a fun song, well performed, but who can call a song by a bunch of kids a love song? How is Michael going to “make a pact” with a girl? Even supposing he liked girls, he is what, eight years old? I am not terribly convinced by love songs by eight year olds.

In My Life is another big stretch. Again, a great song by great songwriters, but it isn't the strongest declaration of love or heat I have ever heard. I certainly wouldn't choose it to represent the Beatles as a love song, and I didn't.

As for Elvis, I think Love me Tender is a better choice than Are you Lonesome, but without Elvis' mystique, both songs suffer. They don't hold up next to better songs by better songwriters. That's why it's harder to cover Elvis than a lot of other singers: a great song will carry a lesser performer, but most of Elvis' songs are not that great. Without Elvis' face and charm, Love me Tender is just a good song.

This applies to a lot of the old songs. The voices and performances were better before the 1960's, but the songwriting was relatively poor. Even Sinatra said something along these lines, when he was talking about Paul Simon. That's why Sinatra and the other oldsters started covering Simon and the Beatles and others (without a lot of success): they could see the songwriting skills of the new generation. This explains, to some extent, why I don't rank the classics like Billie Holiday higher. Yes, Billie Holiday was a fantastic performer, but let's face it, those old songs sound pretty flat, in terms of melody and lyrics and instrumentation, compared to newer songs. If any normal person tried to sing them, he would just sound corny. Songs were just a vehicle for a singer back then. But in the '60's you had a lot of young people with only average voices who wanted to make it big. The only way they could do that is to write better songs than anyone else. Think of Dylan. That's when everything changed. It was no longer about the voice, it was about the song. This upped the ante, because after the general level of songwriting rose, you still had the possibility of great singers. This is how Simon and Garfunkel was born: the meeting of a great singer and a great songwriter. In my opinion, that early example has never been surpassed. Even the Beatles couldn't write as well as Paul Simon, and none of them could sing like Art Garfunkel. The Beatles were a more interesting act, by a lot of criteria, but as a matter of pure talent, no one could ever touch Simon & Garfunkel. No one has to this day.

A love song needs to have two main things: one, it needs a melody capable of really playing on the old heartstrings, something sweet and easy and poignant, but not too sweet and not too easy. Two, it needs

lyrics that the singer can really sell. You have to believe this person is in love, even if he or she isn't. This requires a good performer (or someone really in love), but it also requires earnest lyrics. There are some lyrics no one could sell, even Elvis or Romeo himself. On my list, I include the far ends of this spectrum, since I have John Denver, who really is earnest and in love, and I have Johnny Mathis, who is a master of faking it. I almost didn't include Johnny, due to my criteria, but I decided that was taking it too far in the name of art. Art is a fiction, after all. It just needs to be a convincing fiction. You could take my criteria to ridiculous lengths, as I have witnessed some middle-aged women do with John Denver. Once he divorced Annie, they refused to believe he ever loved her. I have been in and out of love, and I know it isn't that simple. Actually, I haven't been out of love, but I have been out of relationships, for various reasons, good and mostly bad, and so I would never think to throw stones at anyone for losing a love, for whatever reason.

It wasn't until I sat down and started trying to rank these songs that I began to understand what separated the really great ones from the good ones. To use John Denver as the example again, John wasn't as good a songwriter as, say, Nick Drake or Joni Mitchell or Paul Simon, but what bumped him way up the love song list was his directness. You never felt he was writing a love song just to achieve a hit, or to make you feel something. He was writing these songs because he actually felt something himself, and wanted to reveal it. That kind of earnestness is worth a lot. You get the same sort of solid feeling from Jim Croce and David Wilcox and David Gates. It is the feeling you definitely *don't* get from Madonna or Celine Dion or Keith Urban or Justin Timberlake or Christina Aguilera or any of the current crop of top performers. You also don't get it from Joni Mitchell in her love songs, since she never seems to be in love. She is always in love with the *idea* of love, like Etta James. She is in love with her own thrill, but doesn't seem to care a flip for the guy. She wrote some fantastic songs, but love songs were not her specialty.

Which brings me to my final opinion here. I find it sad that so few women made this list. Some of my readers will try to blame me for not being more "inclusive," but that is just misdirection. It isn't a problem of my method, it is a problem that seems to be embedded in the whole idea of a love song, and in the way men and women express love. Women are supposed to be more in touch with their feelings and better able to express themselves verbally, but in the matter of lovesongs we don't find that to be the case. Women would seem to be quite adept at expressing discontent, anger, unfairness, and abstract feelings of happiness or sadness, but we don't find many examples of specific adoration. While the man to woman list is long and heavy with lovesongs written for specific women, often by name, and often utterly adoring and lovesick, we get very few of these songs from women to men. And most of those we do get turn out to be written by men or by corporate committees (as with Celine Dion and Whitney Houston). Even Olivia Newton-John's entry here, which she sings very earnestly and charmingly, was written by Jeff Barry. Roberta Flack's entry was written by Ewan MacColl. Don Gibson wrote Patsy Cline's entry here. So Christine McVie's *Songbird* turns out to be a real rarity.

I will be told that women have written a lot of lovesick songs, and that may be true, but scouring the hit lists, you don't find many of them. I know because I looked. I tried to find a great lovesong by Joni,



with no luck. Carol King's greatest hits aren't really lovesongs. Stevie Nicks' hits are breakup songs or songs to Sara or Rhiannon. Barbara Streisand was just an earlier version of Celine Dion: Paul Williams wrote Evergreen and Marvin Hamlisch wrote The Way We Were. The closest thing I found was Dido, since she writes her own stuff and is fairly sugary, in the way I am talking about. I considered putting her on the list as ballast, but her songs just aren't good enough to stand beside Jim Croce or the Eagles. She sounds like a warmed-over Sarah McLachlan, with another coat of saccharin.

Norah Jones writes her own songs and Come Away with Me is a good song. And it is a traditional lovesong. But I wouldn't say it is one of the greatest lovesongs of all time. Her best song is I Don't know Why, but it isn't a lovesong. In fact, it tends to prove my point, since I find the lyrics sort of maddening. It might be titled, "I don't know why I stood you up, but it is probably because I am a confused modern girl who is more concerned with protecting herself than doing what I say I will do. Oh, and I don't know how to use that cellphone that is glued to my hand, to call a guy and let him know I can't make it." As a guy who has been stood up by confused modern girls literally hundreds of times, I have difficulty being charmed by songs like this.

Colbie Caillat would appear to be my best hope in this regard, and I include her song Realize for one reason: it gives me goosebumps. It passes the lovesong test. It passes the earnestness test with flying colors. The video also makes me smile because it is so old-fashioned and low-budget. I find that charming somehow. I find it charming that she is standing in front of picture screen, and I find it charming that she obviously had to hire some model to be her boyfriend, like all the real guys have to do with their videos. I find it charming that she isn't dating the prince of Monaco or Harry Potter or Ellen Degeneres. Her duet with Jason Mraz (Lucky) is also pretty successful for a duet, but again it proves my point. Watch the video: they are in different cities during the entire thing. They must have mailed in their parts. Not only do they not love each other, it looks like they didn't even like each other.

So, although women no doubt do occasionally write sappy lovesongs to specific guys, these songs usually aren't their best songs. Colbie Caillat stands out like a sweet sappy thumb on a hand of Alanis Morissettes and Christina Aguileras. But men's best songs tend to be their lovesongs. Men are famous for being unable to express themselves around the house, but I guess they are just saving it for a great lovesong.

(1) Bridge Over Troubled Water —Simon & Garfunkel  
For Emily —Simon & Garfunkel  
Greensleeves —Anon.  
And I Love Her —The Beatles  
Time in a Bottle —Jim Croce  
The First Time Ever I saw your Face —Roberta Flack  
Don't Throw it all Away —Andy Gibb  
I Have to Say I Love You in a Song —Jim Croce  
How Deep is Your Love? —BeeGees

(10) Smoke gets in your Eyes. Platters  
 Let's Get it On —Marvin Gaye  
 Leavin' on a Jet Plane —John Denver  
 Everything I Own —Bread  
 I Love You Just the Way You Are —Billy Joel  
 Please Come to Boston —Dave Loggins  
 Chasing Cars —Snow Patrol  
 The Air that I Breathe —The Hollies  
 You are So Beautiful —Joe Cocker  
 Songbird —Fleetwood Mac (Christine McVie)  
 Still in Love with You —Al Green  
 How Much I Feel —Ambrosia  
 (20)Can't Help Falling —Elvis Presley  
 Make it with You —Bread  
 Sarah Smile —Hall & Oates  
 Best of My Love —Eagles  
 Never my Love —The Association  
 This is a Rebel Song —Sinead O'Connor  
 Annie's Song —John Denver  
 Sunshine of my Life —Stevie Wonder  
 Something in the Way She Moves —James Taylor  
 Sweet Dreams —Patsy Cline  
 (30)You Send Me —Sam Cooke  
 Chances Are —Johnny Mathis  
 Suddenly —Cliff Richard and Olivia Newton-John  
 Day by Day —Doris Day  
 I Need You —The Beatles  
 Don't Explain —Billie Holiday  
 The Last Farewell —Roger Whittaker  
 I Love You —Climax Blues Band  
 Unforgettable —Nat King Cole  
 Mandy —Barry Manilow  
 (40) Unchained Melody —Righteous Brothers  
 Fields of Gold —Sting  
 Over my Head —Fleetwood Mac  
 Baby I Love your Way —Peter Dinklage  
 Can't Take my Eyes off of You —Frankie Valli  
 Happy Together —Turtles  
 All the Way —Frank Sinatra  
 When a Man Loves a Woman —Percy Sledge  
 Higher and Higher —Jackie Wilson

All out of Love —Air Supply  
 (50) Wonderful Tonight —Eric Clapton  
 I Can't Stop Lovin' You —Ray Charles  
 She Moved Through the Fair —Loreena McKennitt  
 Hooked on a Feeling —B. J. Thomas  
 Without your Love —Roger Daltry  
 Our House —Crosby Stills & Nash  
 Sweet Life —Paul Davis  
 Aubrey —Bread  
 Realize —Colbie Caillat  
 Close to You —Carpenters  
 Language of the Heart —David Wilcox  
 Lost without your Love —Bread  
 (60)Your Song —Elton John  
 Without You —Nilsson  
 I Just Wanna be your Everything —Andy Gibb  
 Just Remember I Love You —Firefall  
 My Eyes Adored You —Frankie Valli  
 My Sweet Lady —John Denver  
 Home —Michael Bublé  
 Cherish —The Association  
 Baby Blue —George Strait  
 Falling —LeBlanc & Carr  
 This Guy's in Love —Herb Alpert  
 I'd Love You to Want Me —Lobo

Afterword: in researching this list, I came across the latest evidence of the collapse of western civilization: Justin Bieber. In an effort to sell rap to white pre-teens, the evil corporations have paid Usher to adopt a honky child. [I assume they have paid him extra not to be caught with said child in his bed]. That leaves only the pre-K demographic uncaptured, and I guess we can look forward to seeing Snoop-Dogg texting Sesame Street from his limo, trolling chicks with Big Bird, and giving away a free baby Elmo with his next CD.

# Letter To Daniel Socolow

Daniel J. Socolow

*Director, Fellows Program*

Dear Mr. Socolow,

In reading your overview of the Fellows Program, I believe I have encountered a rather large contradiction. The Foundation lists as a primary requirement that Fellows should be highly original and self-directed. It awards fellowships to individuals rather than institutions. Furthermore, Fellows may be “with or without institutional affiliations.”

But in the section on nominations, we find that candidates must be known to a small number of nominators, nominators who are encouraged to nominate the “most creative people they know within their field.” What this means in practice is that, in each particular field of endeavor, insiders have a marked advantage over outsiders. It is easy to see that those “with affiliations” of whatever kind are much more likely to be known to nominators. The question then becomes, how can your Foundation discover those who do not have affiliations with major institutions, clubs, universities, or markets?

Your Foundation and others often make the claim, or confirm the old adage, that innovation comes from the margins. It is those who are bold enough to be self-directed and original who make the greatest advances in all fields. This is known to history. It has always been true and it is still true. You explicitly confirm it once more in the opening paragraphs of your overview, where you make a nod to these margins. But the fact is that these margins are unaddressed by your method of nomination. Those without affiliations can hardly be expected to be known or supported by those who are at the center of major institutions.

Beyond that, the greatest geniuses in history have always been at odds with the status quo. They were geniuses precisely because they could see or do what others couldn't. But this sort of ability is very unpopular at the present time. I remind you of the current philosophy of visual art, a philosophy that dismisses talent and excellence as concepts. It does not believe in genius, hierarchy of any kind, beauty, or the ultimate value of the artifact or artist. To a lesser extent this is true in every field. Every field has sharp boundaries, and success is achieved by accepting those boundaries, not by ignoring them. In many fields the margins have been repressed or shut down, since there is almost no way to exist “without institutional affiliations.”

From its press releases, one expects the MacArthur Foundation to be addressing this very problem; to be looking at ways to strengthen the margins; to make it possible for talent to survive beyond the often limiting borders of academe. It used to be that private wealth supported this margin directly: wealthy or semi-wealthy “amateurs” often made great contributions to many fields, by pursuing self-directed courses of study or research. In a democracy this phenomenon is trebly threatened, since the wealthy rarely pursue or encourage private research, since high achievement itself is frowned upon as unegalitarian, and since contributions from the margins are no longer vetted. Amateurs have been forbidden from the outset, since they threaten the careers and funding of professionals.

You must realize that in many fields, what you call “being without institutional affiliation” is what the field calls “being an amateur,” or even, “being a crank.” It is naïve to suppose that those with institutional affiliation will give serious consideration to those without it. Unless there is a firm directive, and constant pressure, all consideration will be given by those *with* institutional affiliation *to* those with institutional affiliation. Everybody knows this. It is human nature. It is understandable. But your Foundation was created to counter this nature.

In the end, the most highly original and self-directed individuals will not be found surrounded by clubs and institutions. They will not be found accepting the terms of everyone else. For this reason they are unlikely to be popular. This is more true now than it has ever been, for the reason I stated above. In our highly egalitarian milieu, being unclubbable is perhaps the greatest curse of all. Highly original and self-directed individuals are not clubbable and never have been. They work more efficiently without the help of others, and others do not take this fact graciously. The MacArthur Foundation should help make the work of such people as efficient as possible, with no regard to social or careerist concerns.

It would be more logical for a Foundation that is trying to support extraordinary achievement to look among the unpopular and unclubbable. This is where the geniuses have usually been found. The popular and clubbable, those with institutional affiliations, do not need the support of special foundations, since by definition they already have institutional support. Outside academe, I don’t honestly know how you are going to tell the geniuses from the cranks, since in the beginning it is not always easy to do. But you aren’t even trying. Anyone who claims to support innovation must take risks. Sifting for talent outside the main channels is risky. But if you are sifting for the big talent that is most in threat of being wasted, then that is where you must look. It seems to me that your charter demands it.

*End of Letter*

Some who are familiar with the 2005 list of Fellows will answer that 8 of the 25 Fellows are unaffiliated. But this is deceptive. The Foundation has a habit of listing all practicing artists as being unaffiliated, though the ones chosen are usually insiders of the clearest kind. These "unaffiliated" artists have already won the support of many institutions, though they may not actually work for them. Let us look at the 2005 list.

Teresita Fernandez, 37, of New York, New York, has an MFA, is a fellow of the American Academy in Rome, was an artist in residence at Artspace, and has been given shows at the Corcoran and the MCA, Miami, among other places. Her work is described like this: "she creates large-scale, referential constructions, such as a pool, a waterfall, and a sand dune stripped of specific context. With these pared-down pieces, she invites viewers to draw from their personal memories and observations."

I hardly think I need comment on her work, beyond stating that I am fully capable of drawing from personal memories in front of a real sand dune, or no sand dune. But just consider how far away from any margin Ms. Fernandez must be. She is affiliated in not one, but many ways. One suspects that a majority of her time in New York City must be spent making the proper affiliations and connections, otherwise how could one so young be so well rewarded for so little?

Julie Mehretu, 34, of New York, New York, has an MFA and three artist in residences (at 34!) in Houston, Harlem, and Minneapolis. She has shown at the Whitney, the Carnegie, and MOMA. In her work (one title being *Transcending: the New International*) she "depicts public spaces from around the globe—museums, stadiums, and international airports—in the form of heroically-scaled maps and architectural plans. On surfaces encased in coats of transparent resin, she paints over these sprawling drawings a maelstrom of colorful, geometric abstractions, iconic imagery, and loosely figurative markings that evoke a world of associations."

Yes, if you need fake sand dunes to evoke personal memories, then you also might have a "world of associations" evoked by "figurative markings" scribbled upon maps of airports and stadiums. One question, are "figurative markings" the same thing as figures? Maybe just badly drawn figures?

Ms. Mehretu is unarguably a genius at impressing the sort of people that curate at MOMA, and that apparently act as art nominators at the MacArthur. One can say, without any fear of contradiction, that they are the same sort of people: odds are they are the same people.

Fazal Sheikh, 40, New York, New York. Do you see a pattern here? Mr. Sheikh was a Fulbright Fellow at age 27 and has exhibited at many major museums, including (again) the Corcoran. I would say there is a good chance one of our nominators works at the Corcoran. Mr. Sheikh's work is documentary photography of refugees, which we are told, "calls attention to the persistent nature of conflict and highlights the importance of bearing witness."

I don't deny the usefulness of good documentary photography, or the need to be reminded of tragedy, but Mr. Sheikh's selection here looks more like politics to me than art. Photographing refugees is just the sort of thing that these museums eat up like cake, and a plurality of avant garde artists now try to include some representative of the dispossessed in every box. If this sort of politics wasn't a requirement of the new art, one might be more likely to believe in the sincerity of artists. As it stands, it is usually nothing more than the artist fulfilling expectations, and the museum or critic using it as propaganda. Besides, we hardly need great art to remind us these days of the "persistent nature of conflict or the importance of bearing witness." That is what a million TV and radio stations do, as well as newspapers, magazines, and the internet. Is it possible that art might occasionally be used for some other purpose?

Jonathan Lethem, 41, Brooklyn, New York. Good to know these nominators are venturing so far out of Manhattan. A Bennington graduate whose writings have appeared in *The New Yorker* and *Rolling Stone*, Lethem is represented by a major publisher, with ten books (including 7 novels) already on the shelves. That's not really what I call unaffiliated.

"Characterized by narrative leaps between vastly divergent genres, his fiction weaves the conventions of noir mysteries, westerns, science fiction, and comic books into coming-of-age tales that are otherwise evocative and realistic in content." If you think that sounds confusing, it is. I have read his fiction and it is unreadable. It is avant garde fiction of the worst kind, trying to mix unmixables. Like *Blade Runner* with lots of self-conscious asides and failed humor and an *Infinite Jest* annoying complexity. Like Philip K. Dick meets Raymond Chandler meets David Foster Wallace, and not in a good way. Lethem takes everything that is wrong with new fiction and stirs it into the same pot—he is like the Jerry Bruckheimer of the publishing world.

Edet Belzberg, 35, New York, New York. Good to be back from the outer meridians of Brooklyn. An MA from Columbia, a lecturer at the same place, and a sometimes professor at New York University. She is a documentary filmmaker with only one film at the time of nomination, a film of, you guessed it, homeless children living in a train station in Bucharest.

Again, documenting these things can be important and even admirable, so why should it leave such a bad taste in my mouth in this case? Could it be because so many phony avant garde artists from New York City have used various tragedies for self promotion? Could it be because this sort of art via sociopolitics has become de rigueur, and therefore transparent? Could it be because oversaturation of tragedies we cannot affect actually contributes to callousness and hopelessness? Could it be because the US has tragedies and atrocities daily piled up around it, within walking distance of home, which it ignores to go to these films and exhibits?

Ted Ames, 66, Stonington, Maine, has an MS in biochemistry and served as executive director of the Maine Gillnetters Association, as marine resources director for Maine's sustainable fisheries



organization, the Island Institute, as president and laboratory director of Alden/Ames Laboratory, and for many years as an advisor to the New England Fisheries Management Council.

How is that unaffiliated? Wasn't that a list of his affiliations?

Mr. Ames was chosen as a fellow for "fusing the roles of applied scientist and lobsterman to respond to increasing threats to the fishery ecosystem from decades of over-harvesting." Well, all his years as director of various institutes didn't keep the stocks from being depleted, did they? Instead of developing computer models, Mr. Ames and his fellow fishermen/scientists might try not over-harvesting. You hardly need a "rigorous methodology" or the "anecdotal experience of aging fishermen" to tell you that. You don't need a genius grant either. You need a decade-long moratorium and some restraint when it is over, restraint that these aging fishermen never showed in the first instance. If Mr. Ames had been jailed for cutting nets or leading boycotts or ostracized for filing lawsuits in the name of the lobsters, he might deserve an award for bravery. But these studies by industry associations are always just smokescreens. What they most want is some way to breed fish and lobsters like cows and pigs, and they care as much about the health of the sea as do most ranchers about the health of the land.

Michael Walsh, 62, Arlington, VA. Vehicle emissions specialist, "unaffiliated", but worked for the City of New York and the US EPA. Now works for the OECD and the United Nations and well as for the EPA's of Brazil, Mexico, etc.

Considering the emissions standards in all these places, and the amount of unnecessary emission due to size and type of engine, I can't imagine anyone less deserving of a genius grant. Like most specialists, he is likely used mainly to stall or prevent necessary legislation, by giving false or skewed testimony, and providing misleading numbers. Anyone with any scruple at all would have used his knowledge to directly inform the public about the deficiencies of industry and government. Instead we find Mr. Walsh profiting from governmental bodies all over the world.

For the record, the leader in controlling emissions is Japan, which you will notice is not a client of Mr. Walsh. If not for the domination of Japanese cars, the air in US cities would now be unbreathable, or I should say even more unbreathable than it is. As proof of this, look at the cabs in NYC. Do you think it is really necessary that these cabs be as big, as fast, and as inefficient as they are? This is an example of a tragedy or atrocity close to home that all are blind to, and that Mr. Walsh is party to. If he has been advising his clients to do what they have done, then he is corrupt. If he has been advising them to do something else than what they have done, he is ineffectual.

Next we will be giving genius grants to chemists at Union Carbide or Dow for not killing as many people as they might have, or to researchers at Philip Morris for giving us cigarettes with 15% less tar.

Joseph Curtin, 52, Ann Arbor, Michigan. Finally, a truly unaffiliated fellow. Mr. Curtin is a violin maker. At first he looks like a breath of fresh air on this list, but I take no consolation in his appearance. For two reasons: 1) He will appear to most to stand with the "artists" on the list, but he is not an artist,

he is a craftsman. A great player of the violin may be an artist, a violin maker cannot be. This is because there is no possible emotional content in making a violin. This means he does not stand as an artist, he displaces an artist. Of course this can be said of the others as well, the documentarians and figure markers and ersatz sand dune heapers who may be creative but who are not terribly artistic. 2) He might be worthy of a fellowship nonetheless, of course, if his craft is of a high enough order and of great enough importance. Violin making would appear to qualify, except that we are told that Mr. Curtin is a "luthier with research interests in nontraditional materials and nontraditional structures. . . creating entirely new instruments that incorporate contemporary materials and aesthetics." That is a big red flag, my friend. A new Stradivarius would qualify for a genius grant, but Mr. Curtin gave up on wood and varnish a long time ago. He could never match the tone of the old instruments with traditional materials, and he still can't with his plastics. But he can get attention by using space age composite materials and weird shapes that impress clueless modern people. He may get more sound out of the instrument, but he has not managed to get better sound.

In this way he is precisely like the modern artist (and even the modern scientist): he has given up on beauty and subtlety (and understanding) and replaced them with flash and volume (and mathematics). And he is also like the new realist painter, who is fooled into thinking that new materials will help him paint better than Titian. Whereas the truth of the matter is that it is the traditional materials that allowed Titian to paint as well as he did. New materials actually prevent subtlety. That is what the Strad copiers could never understand. They were so convinced of the superiority of new materials that they could never allow themselves to use the natural materials (varnishes and waxes and so on) Stradivarius used in the form he likely used them; that is, non-pure and adulterated. Their professionalism wouldn't allow them to use a "rough" form of anything, since that would deprive them of using all their new machines.

Emily Thompson, 43, San Diego. This is number 9, if you are counting, so Thompson must be affiliated, which she is, to UC San Diego. I have included her here only because she is listed as an "aural historian". What is an aural historian? In her book, *The Soundscape of Modernity*, "she examines the transformation of the American soundscape from the turn of the century to the opening of Radio City Music Hall in 1933. Thompson explores innovations in the science of acoustics, the emergence of excessive noise, and the efforts of scientists and designers to create new spaces and a new, 'modern' sound. She documents the interplay between differences in acoustic characteristics of buildings constructed during this period and increases in the value placed at the time on technological mastery, efficiency and control in modern life. Thompson's most recent project is on the role of engineers, projectionists, and other industry technicians in the transition to synchronized sound in cinema."

Another made-up sub-field of recent history, trying to turn something that might be interesting for ten pages into a shelf of books and a new university department. This is the sort of arcane project that Congress funds as part of some pork barrel, or the sort of coffee table book that sells only to projectionists and industry technicians and other aural historians. How it ends up on the MacArthur Foundation page is beyond me.

Now for a recap. Of the eight unaffiliated fellows, five were in the arts. All five were from New York City (or Brooklyn). To put it another way, there were no artists who were not from New York City and no artists who were not (falsely) listed as unaffiliated. Everyone nominated and selected was affiliated in a multitude of ways. No one even came close to any margin. The arts nominators really need to get out of New York City. I hear there are trains now that may go beyond Brooklyn.

And the MacArthur Foundation needs to quit calling people with multiple affiliations "unaffiliated", just to make it look like they are independent and diverse. These I have listed are diverse only in color and dependent upon the good graces of the status quo in every conceivable way.

# *Resting Malaguena*

Degas Pastel Society

winner, 1993

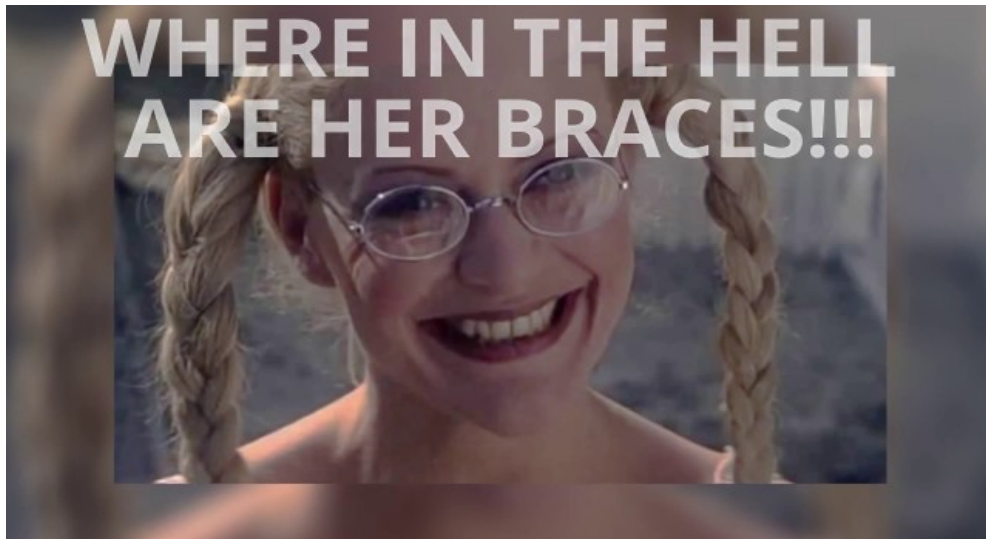
New Orleans Art Association Award,

judge Aaron Shikler



pastel  
18 x 12 in.

## DOLLY'S BRACES



*by Miles Mathis*

*First published June 26, 2019*

I have already written [a short paper](#) on the Mandela Effect, but I am back with more. I have told some of my readers in email that the hoaxers were going to get caught, and now they have. Since I wrote that paper two years ago, they have continued to add examples of “parallel universes”, and the 1979 film *Moonraker* is one of them. This is apropos, since of course *Moonraker* is a James Bond film, and we know the Bond films are a production of the spooks. The books came right out of MI5, since they were written by agent Ian **Fleming**. And we can say the same for the films.

Anyway, many people remember that in the film, *Jaws* had a pretty blonde love interest named Dolly, and they remember she had braces. It was a joke, since both she and *Jaws* had metal mouths. I remember it vaguely myself, though I wouldn't stake my life on it. I saw *The Spy Who Loved Me* several times, but *Moonraker* only once. I didn't much like it. However, even though I didn't have an ironclad memory of it, the example did stick in my craw. Of all the Mandela Effect examples, this one jumped out at me as one mostly likely to fail. Don't exactly know why, just intuition. My intuition is pretty good, as you know. So I thought I would look for old VHS copies on Ebay. I immediately got confirmation, though it wasn't the sort of direct confirmation you are hoping for (though that is coming up). It is a bit more tangential. . . but still a huge red red flag, telling us we are on the right track. The oldest VHS copies were in a “big box slip”, and they just happened to have Dolly pictured on the back cover!

Now, ask yourself, what are the odds that Dolly and Jaws would appear on the back cover of this old VHS? And that she would just happen to be smiling, showing the lack of braces? Do you think that was the second most memorable scene in the entire movie, making it a primary selling point? I just watched the official theatrical trailer, and in nearly four minutes of highlights we don't see Dolly once. Not really surprising, is it? So why would they cut her from the highlights but use her in one of two pictures on the back of the VHS?

So am I saying the CIA/MI5/Hollywood has altered all copies of *Moonraker* they could find? Yep. Am I saying that the spooks are in control of every copy of *Moonraker* sold at Ebay? Yep. Why is that hard to imagine? Both Ebay and Paypal are owned by the billionaire/trillionaire families, and Ebay has the ability to control each and every page. Don't believe me? Just this week, one of my lots was taken down because I simply mentioned the word "velcro". I was selling a Ron Jon cap, and it had a velcro closure on the back. So I stated that. Turns out that is a copyright violation. Can't mention velcro even if the cap does have velcro. Why? I don't effing know. But it does prove that Ebay filters every single lot, and can control lots any way it wishes. If it wants to plant copies of *Moonraker* on Ebay to help out its CIA/MI5 pals, it can easily do that.

We can even check out the seller of this VHS. Strangely, this seller lgodwin4 has been a member since 2004, but in 15 years only has 668 in feedback and 7 followers. He ships out of Freeport, TX. He sells mainly movies, and of his 29 lots, we also find *The Exorcist*, *Cat's Eye*, *Annabelle*, *The Nun*, *Psychopaths*, *The Axe Murders of Villisca*, *Amy Winehouse Exposed*, *General Idi Amin Dada*, and *Dark Souls III*. His one non-movie lot is a book commemorating King Saud's 1957 visit to the US. Starting bid is \$2000. Come to your own conclusions.

There's a second big box slip copy of *Moonraker* on Ebay, and it has the same photos on the back. Its seller is also suspicious. She is brhilde-60, member since Sept. 2018, 261 feedback, shipping from San Antonio, TX. Is that Brunnhilde, the Valkyrie? She also specializes in horror film lots. She also sells old VHS tapes recorded off the TV, "sold as blank". What? I've never seen that before. I'm tempted to bid just to see what's on them. I'm guessing the bidding is rigged and that these lots are not meant for me. She has advanced screening copies of *Blow* and *Scream*. One lot was so interesting I had to buy it. I will update you once I get it. Strange that both big box slip copies of *Moonraker* ship out of Texas, one from the city Freeport, which is little more than Dow Chemicals, and the other from San Antonio, which is military city USA, dotted with military bases.

Plus, what is a big box slip? Never heard of it. Only three sellers on ebay use the term, these two and a vhsking84 in Watertown, New York. He has a copy of *Filthy Harry* for \$300, a "regional" comedy that just happens to include a huge cast of celebrity body doubles.





Given all that, I continued to research, and I eventually tripped across [this guy in the UK](#) who claims to work in the field of film editing. He remains anonymous, but his research passes my sniff test. He does seem to spin his own research, refusing to read it like I do, but that is almost beside the point. If he is intending to whitewash it, he utterly fails.



At that link, you will see for yourself that the braces are still there, under poor editing. Since he proves his copy has been altered, erasing the braces, we may assume all available copies have also been tampered with. I am fairly sure there are copies in existence that the spooks haven't been able to find yet, and I would love to be the one to find one, though the chances of that are remote. I would urge all my readers to keep their eyes open, however, especially those who frequent local library sales, secondhand stores, and the like. The spooks can control Ebay and Craigslist, but it is a bit more difficult for them to control minor secondhand sales in remote markets. One of us will find a copy of this film or one of the other Mandela examples.

Also see [this BBC article from 2014](#), an obit for Richard Kiel who played Jaws. It states that **Kiel reprised the role of Jaws in the 1979 film Moonraker. The film culminated with Jaws changing sides and joining forces with Bond to save the world. It also saw romance blossom between Jaws and Dolly, a small, pig-tailed blonde with braces, comically played by Blanch Ravalec.**

The James Bond movie database [Universal Exports says pretty much the same thing](#): “Dolly is a short blond girl with pigtails, glasses and braces”. [They may have changed the glasses while they were at it.] At that site, they have replaced the photo with a new one, with no braces, but they forgot to change the text.

I beg you to notice this means that these people are willing to deface their own previous “art”, proving they are not artists. It is actually against the law to alter or deface art, but that law applies to art buyers. It does not apply to the original creators, who can alter or deface their own works without penalty. Since we may assume it is Intelligence altering these old films, that is just more proof Intelligence was also the original creator.

So, I hope you can see that this evidence of alteration destroys the theory of parallel universes. Braces don't get partially erased from teeth by colliding universes; or by mischievous aliens, either. I would



assume aliens are better film editors than that. If they wanted to make a change in our recent history, they would do it with more finesse. You wouldn't catch them at it. Only Intel is this sloppy, since Intel is still made up of humans, last time I checked. Humans are generally incompetent, and we see that again here. Government employees are especially incompetent. Only that can explain the incompletely erased braces we see in the gif above.



I also did some more research on Fiona Broome, above, the main face of this project since its inception several years ago. Not surprisingly, nothing is known of her beyond her brief and self-created bio, which claims she is a respected old-timer in paranormal research. Respected by whom? We aren't told. She has a one-sentence bio at Googlebooks, and no real bio on her own sites. If you click on her name there, you are just taken in circles to pages with no personal information. She doesn't seem to understand what a bio is. In fact, she has no verifiable bio at all, and the name looks like a pseudonym, one chosen to match her ghost-hunting claims. She is like a witch on a broom, you see. Clever. No Fiona Broome is listed at Intelius or InstantCheckmate in the entire US. I would guess the name and photo are just a front for this project, which comes out of some psychological operations unit. Regardless of who or what she is, her “bio” doesn't give her claims any weight at all. I don't know about you, but I don't get my theories on sociology or psychology from ghosthunters or “paragenealogists”. But despite being such a person—whom the mainstream claim to be highly skeptical of—she is heavily promoted by this same mainstream. The Wikipedia page on False Memory references her as if she is some sort of university scholar.

Although Broome's Mandela Effect website drives this project, and although an important part of that site is a forum to discuss examples, she admits she censors any mention of this being a mass gaslighting, or a government project. A search on that finds only one example, and she is warning a poster that she deletes any such conspiracy theories. Rich, seeing that her entire site was created to promote a false conspiracy theory.

Why do I think this whole thing comes out of psychological operations? Because this is now the largest mass-gaslighting project ever attempted, as far as I can tell. I told my readers that in the first paper, but I didn't use the word gaslighting there. I should have, because it is the perfect word. Look it up. It comes from the old 1944 film *Gaslight*, which has not yet been memoryholed as of the time of this writing. In it, thief Charles Boyer tries to convince his new wife Ingrid Bergman she is crazy, so that he can put her in an institution and steal the jewels hidden in her house. One of the ways he does that is to raise and dim the gaslights in the house, then tell her she is imagining it.

This mass-gaslighting project they are calling the Mandela Effect was created as a cohort of the [“time/reality is an illusion” project](#) of mainstream science—where they have been trying to convince us we are living in some sort of glitchy hologram. It is to answer the evergrowing awareness of the distortions people have come to have in the past decade—many of them via my research. I have shown my readers that much of recent history is a lie, including [the high profile assassinations](#), the celebrity deaths, [the fake serial killers](#), and so on. Rather than admit that and come clean, the governors have decided to take the hoax up a notch. They want to convince you that the distortion you have become aware of is even bigger than you think. It isn't just that your government is lying to you all the time about everything. No, it is that you are living in some sort of science-fiction nightmare, where parallel universes are overlapping and intermixing, creating a chaos beyond anyone's understanding or control. However, I have already proven the real answer is much simpler: the chaos is manufactured. The governors even gave it a codename back in the 1960s: **Operation Chaos**. It is admitted that the CIA's project existed under that name, while the FBI's similar program was Operation Cointelpro. They joined sometime in the late 60s. That is not a conspiracy theory. It is partially declassified and you can read about it at Wikipedia and cia.gov. Society was *purposely* destabilized, and they tell us this was done to throw revolutionaries off-balance. It was to infiltrate the Communists, the Anarchists, the anti-war protestors, the hippies, etc. Or that is what they would have you believe. But the real reason chaos was manufactured is for. . . profit. Happy people in a stable society spend only a fraction of miserable people in a fractured society. If they are in constant fear, they spend even more. If they are alone, they spend even more.

But when I began to unwind and expose all their major projects, going back centuries, it was Intel that was thrown off-balance. They weren't used to being out-psyoped, especially by the truth. Yes, truth is the ultimate psyop against lies, since it is like putting the psyche through a wash cycle. And while lies can be answered by other lies, the truth is harder to deal with. It isn't really answerable or spinnable, although they are doing their best. Their best, as you see, is turning up the volume. They think a bigger lie might work where the smaller ones weren't. Except that the bigger lie is always less subtle, and therefore an even bigger target for the truth.

Nonetheless, they think that these projects may create enough confusion to convince you I am crazy. They are trying to create a competition in your head, where either I am crazy, you are crazy, or the

entire world is crazy. They don't think you have the stamina or fortitude to choose either me or yourself against the entire world. You and I can't be right here, they will say, because that would make hundreds or thousands of people on the internet wrong. It would mean hundreds or thousands of people are lying their asses off for money, including the actress who played Dolly—who is denying she ever wore braces. But I have shown you piles of evidence [in past papers](#) that not only hundreds or thousands of people are lying, but millions. Literally millions of people are working for Intelligence one way or another, and many or most of them are paid liars. So you better to learn to trust yourself and face the truth: you are surrounded by mass deception, on a worldwide scale.

I found more evidence of the psyop at Wikipedia, on that page for False Memory. There they remind of the 2016 Nova episode *Memory Hackers*, where Dr. Julia Shaw gives us a 6-part recipe for installing false memories:

**First is creating an atmosphere of trust by establishing expertise and authority. Follow with interviewing the participant about real memories, reinforcing and encouraging vivid recollection upon the next session. The third step is to introduce a false memory. The fourth step is to commence imagination inflation, where subjects are guided to focus attention on retrieving a memory using actual details from their past. The fifth step is to apply social pressure indicating that the technique works for most people, thus making the subject try harder to recall details. Finally, ask leading questions.**

So if you think these people wouldn't mess with your head, think again. They do it, admit it, and then tell you their methods. Wikipedia admits that despite the public finding the planting of false memories to be objectionable or even immoral, there are no laws against it. We may assume the same is true of mass gaslighting. Even if we prove the CIA (or other entity) is doing this, since it isn't illegal they can just shrug their shoulders, tweak the program, and try again.

You may also wish to remind yourself of the plot of Orwell's book *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, where a major device is the Ministry of Truth, whose main job is rewriting history. One way they do that is by *altering old films*. So although you aren't living in a hologram, in some ways you are living in a stageplay based on that book. Although dressing it as fiction, agent Orwell told you what they were doing and what they were planning to do. His job was prepping your mind for the near future, so that it wouldn't seem so novel to you. You could slot your new experience, forgetting who put the slot there, or even that there was a slot.

This is the world you are living in, which is far more insidious than any glitchy hologram. But though it is more insidious, it is—at the same time—more amenable to your response. There would be nothing you could do about a glitchy hologram or overlapping universes. But you can fix this current problem with a flick of your own switch. Just stop believing these people. Don't buy what they are selling, whether it is history, psychology, art, science, or medicine. Tell them to take their projects elsewhere, preferably up their own behinds. And tell them to send their bills somewhere else as well.

That was always the plot hole in *Nineteen Eight-Four*, you know. It relied on a populace completely unaware of the truth. If the masses had become aware of the Matrix there, they would have balked, and no amount of brainwashing could counteract that—not with all the eyeball munching rats in the world. That is where the governors have failed. In having to promote these ridiculous Mandela Effect psyops, they are admitting we are aware of the distortions. We have seen OZ behind the curtain, and the game

is up. At this point, no amount of flashing lights, smoke machines, or circus patter is going to make any difference. Trust, once lost, cannot be regained.

## Mandolin Player



*oil*

*18 x 14 in.*

*Nude in Rocker*

## Nude In Rocker



*pastel*

*38 x 22 in., 97 x 56 cm.*



*Self Portrait in VanDyck Collar*





# *A Million Little Pieces of \$#@%*

*by Miles Mathis*



[go to Oprah interview](#)

It seems to me that the last word, or the correct word, has not yet been spoken on the James Frey matter. As most know, Oprah at first supported, then scolded Frey for falsifying parts of his memoir. Some commentators like Dowd came down on the side of truth scrupulously defined (ironic that) and others came down on the side of *laissez faire* standards in non-fiction. Both sides seem naïve to me. Neither really touches solid ground in this whole fracas. To reach that solid foundation, one must consider the history of memoirs and of publishing them. One must look at books like Caesar's *De Bello Gallico* and Cellini's *Life* and Rousseau's *Confessions* and Whistler's *Gentle Art* and other similar examples to know what to expect from the genre. A memoir is not a documentary, it is not journalism or a book report or a magazine article. A reader should expect that there may be some amount of bragging, inflation, and misremembrance. But this does not make it fiction or fictionalized. It just means that the man or woman who lived the life has earned the right to selectively edit to a certain degree, as he or she sees fit. A memoir that is nothing but tall tales is usually (but not always) useless, but so is a memoir that that reads like a grocery list or an accountant's ledger, footnoted and line-checked.

For this reason, among others, I hope that the courts will throw out all these lawsuits claiming outright fraud. The readers were duped, no doubt, but so is any reader who reads any such book, even the books that are true. Any self-help book or inspirational book is a dupe from the first page, and is supposed to be. Anyone who fails to understand that is a fool, one who would be wasting money on lottery tickets if he weren't wasting it on so-called books.

This is all to say that a memoir or autobiography has *always* held a third position outside of the simple fact/fiction dichotomy. These people who are just discovering this seem to me like people who have never held a library card, who have never read a book that did not have a glossy dust jacket and a picture of the author on the back (or the front). Only among a clientele of literary children could such an issue become an issue. These are the same sort of people who expect advertising to be true, who think that “reality” shows contain any reality, who think that all actors are type-cast. No doubt they are dead sure that the actors who play Joey and Phoebe are dumb in person, and that Matthew Perry (Chandler) is just as charming in real life, without all his lines scripted.

And that is where we return to Oprah and Frey. The modern market for books is a market for literary children of all ages. One only need look at Harry Potter for the ultimate proof of this. The problem with Frey’s book is not that it is false in some details; the problem is that it is a poorly-written series of pages written by a nobody to appeal to squishy TV watchers. Historically, memoirs were written by famous and interesting people, and Frey is neither. He is a literary opportunist, a *litterateur*, a hack. He and his publisher clearly tailored this book to attract a certain sentimental and ignorant “demographic”, which demographic is defined by the Oprah book club member. These people want heart-warming and inspiring stories above all else, stories that can confirm their delusions that losers are not losers—that liars and thieves and drug pushers and wife batterers and spineless employees of big evil companies are not really “bad people”. That they are good people who have just been victimized or repressed or who lacked opportunity. The people who read these books are padding their own guilt, buying insurance against their own failures and shortcomings. They don’t want to read the memoirs of someone who actually did something great or worthwhile: that would only remind them that they sit on the couch all day eating potato chips and watching Oprah. No, they want to read the memoirs of a now-successful loser—a person who was, only yesterday, in jail or on crack or eating from a dumpster. If a man living in a shopping cart, eating cockroaches, can turn his life around and appear a year later on Oprah with a million-selling book, then the sky is the limit for them, too. All it takes is a good therapist, some post-it notes on the mirror, and a few nights with Microsoft Word.

Now, I don’t know if my imagined gloss of Frey’s book is anywhere near the mark. I didn’t read it. I categorically refuse to read any book of that sort. In fact, I refuse to read most contemporary books, since not one in a thousand is worth reading, fiction, non-fiction, or memoir. If I am looking for someone to say something sensible, interesting, or wise, the cutoff line is about 1955. Most usable information is much older. In general, the further you get away from the contemporary US publisher, geographically and chronologically, the better. The modern publisher and author only want to sell you pabulum of one bland flavor or another, in short sentences and easy words. That or shock you with some transparent and scriptable outrage. God forbid you should ever have to open a dictionary, stress your brain with a compound sentence, or digest any idea not invented by television since 1960.

In choosing a book to read, one must take into consideration who is recommending it. Occasionally I do read a book by a living author, and when I do it is because someone whose opinion I trust has recommended it. One must ask why anyone values Oprah’s opinion on books? What, exactly, has she

done to earn anyone's trust or admiration? She appeared in a couple of movies, I think, to no great acclaim, then landed on a talkshow. I don't pretend to understand talkshow standards, but by those standards she must be a phenom, since she captured and held a large audience. By those same standards, Jerry Springer is also a phenom. Should we thereby value his opinion on books and art and fine wine and brain surgery? Oprah seems to be a brilliant investor: she knows how to move in the market. If I wanted advice on how to make money in entertainment, I might read her book. But beyond that, I fail to see her expertise. As a critic in a field she knows no better than the man on the street, she can only be a nuisance.

Some will say that is the nature of the modern critic. As an equal of his audience, he can best advise it on what it will like and dislike. But this is to dismiss the function of literature as an educational tool. It is to dismiss the educational value of *any* action, whether it be going to the cinema or to the museum. Many think of Oprah as a sort of spiritual advisor. But a spiritual advisor treats his or her subject not just as a means of entertainment. He must also treat it as a didactic device. Even Oprah pretends that her book club does its audience some good. But advice from an equal cannot do you any good: it can only keep you at the given level—the *status quo*. That is why we read in the first place—we read the words of someone who knows something we do not. Otherwise the effort is pointless. This means that both the writer and the critic must be in some sense *superior* to their audience. If they do not know more about the subject they are addressing than the audience, the whole show is a waste of time and effort.

Oprah cannot be a proper critic or advisor, since she is not an expert of any sort in the field of literature. To be an expert she would have had to have proven herself either a very good writer or a very good reader, or both. She has done neither. The same can be said of most modern critics. They have no expertise of any kind in the fields they infest, and often do not even pretend to. No critic is ever asked to present his or her qualifications. Usually, being on TV is qualification enough for anything, even becoming President.

This is the problem at the root of the Oprah/Frey affair, not the question of truth. Dowd tried to tie the Frey subject to Bush's frequent lies, but this was only a matter of pushing all headlines into her own pet projects. Bush is one subject, Oprah is another. With Oprah, the problem is that book publishing has been compromised further by her entry into it. Her influence has led to an accelerated popularization of literature, to a greater push to the middle, and to a near-complete loss of the margins. Publishers have finally capitulated *in toto* to the masses and the higher end has been trimmed as a residue of the aristocracy (or the old school by another name). "What every schoolboy knows" is now long dead, and good riddance, it is thought. All education beyond a low and sentimental one is now thought to be pedantry, a sign of elitism. Even the last crusting of intellect in literature has dissolved into self-parody (see for example *Infinite Jest*—a tiresome conglomeration of poses) or *au courant* vulgarity (see *The Crimson Petal and the White*, which, despite being sold as update of Dickens, must open with anal sex). We appear to be approaching some nadir, some dark age of the mind and soul, some lastmanhood of the species. Truth is an important thing, but it pales in comparison to a complete cultural disintegration. Which is perhaps why the commentary has focused

on the former and not the latter. The former is a bit easier to tie up in a box and post to this week's editor.

# MoMA and Dada

*how to spend a Billion and  
get nothing but new Stairs*

by Miles Mathis



The Museum of Modern Art in New York City is one of the most important institutions of Modernism in the world. For decades it has propped up Modern theory by exhibiting trivialities and nullities as pieces of serious culture. It, along with the Whitney Museum and the Guggenheim, has made New York the world capital of Modernism, showing the way for such spin-offs as the Pompidou Center in Paris, the Guggenheim in Bilbao and the Tate Modern in London.

MOMA recently moved into a new building, precipitating a fresh round of articles in the world press. I suspect that such moves are made mainly for this purpose. Since these Modern museums are trumped-up spectacles from the beginning, there is little for the media to report on except the occasional new building. The Museum in Bilbao is the perfect example of this. Without Frank Gehry's absurd building there would be nothing to comment on except ugly rooms of tinker toys and airplane wreckage. The same can be said of the Pompidou, which most visitors treat not as a museum but as a circus ride or a house of mirrors at the fair—a place to giggle and make faces.

The truth is that the Modern or Contemporary Museum has much more to do with architecture than with art. The original Guggenheim began this trend with its Frank Lloyd Wright “headless Michelin Man” design. [I have always thought that the Guggenheim would make more money if it rented rollerblades at the top and piped in pop music. The walls could be re-covered daily in canvas, the skaters could be given brushes, and they could paint masterpieces as they raced each other to the ground floor.] No one but the most nebbish and deluded pseudo-intellectuals goes to such places to look at art. All the “art” could be taken down and replaced by Hefty bags and no one would know the difference. This is made clear whenever a second-level city like Austin or San Diego or Denver builds or thinks of building a new museum. No consideration is given to what collection the museum may house, since this is beside the point. All public and private debate is centered on the architect to hire and how to fit the promotional package around the new building.

The entire explanation for the continued existence of the Modern museums is the steady stream of propaganda that the media puts forth on the topic, and that propaganda is always heavy with kudos to the architects and chairmen and corporate sponsors. The writers of such pieces seem to understand that there is no art to report on, and that describing the possible content of the museum is counterproductive on every level. The press release is a sample of public relations, and to court the public it is best not to annoy it beforehand with papier-mache turds and piles of rocks. That can come later, once the funding has passed. At the beginning, all the public needs to know is that tourists will arrive, spending money and buying film and creating jobs so that babies may be fed and cars filled with gas (or the reverse).

For some reason which remains a mystery to me, nearly every mainstream publication feels it necessary to publish a squib from the avant garde on a semi-regular basis. Even the *Wall Street Journal*, which no one would accuse of having leftist tendencies, has for a long time reported on the avant garde, usually taking reports straight from the horse’s mouth (or the reverse). *Time* and *Newsweek* have also played pony for Modernism, although there is no chance that even a small minority of their readers is really interested in what Bruce Nauman or Cindy Sherman is up to. Reports on contemporary art would seem to fall somewhere between reports on Hollywood celebrities—which, though vacuous, really do seem to interest a lot of people—and reports on books and operas—which, though beyond the experience of most readers, are considered edifying. What is never explained is how Nauman sitting in a room in clown face is supposed to be edifying. Modernism has somehow continued to ride a cultural wave without ever having to justify its presence on any grounds. It does not satisfy on the level of kitsch, since no one is showing cleavage or getting married or divorced or dating Jennifer Aniston or telling jokes or sword fighting. And it does not satisfy on the level of art, since it consciously, explicitly, and with great fanfare gave up on that long long ago. The only answer seems to be that people are making a lot of money. Nauman is very rich, and that in itself is fascinating to the public. I suggest that it therefore makes more sense to put the articles about Modernism in with the articles about lottery winners. They have achieved their notoriety with equal amounts of skill and worthiness.

What MOMA has done that many of the other Contemporary museums have not is leaven their collection with a few actual works of art. MOMA’s status and longevity have allowed it to collect several works which bring real people through the doors for real reasons. Van Gogh’s *Starry Night* is

foremost among these. But I am here to bury Caesar not to praise him. I am fairly certain that were Van Gogh's ghost able to speak, he would tell us to please move him to the Met where he belongs, not here among all this fakery.

Those who want to read glowing reviews can be satisfied almost everywhere they turn; you must think of this article as the counterpoint to the Chamber of Commerce-approved opinion. For I have always found MOMA to be one of the most annoying places on earth. This should come as no surprise, since from its initial charter MOMA's founding principle and *raison d'être* has been to annoy people like me. The overriding aim of Modernism has always been to foil any natural desire for art. To weed it out, to chastise it, to mock it, and finally to extirpate it. Those like me who resisted this surgery, who did not go gentle into that good night, have been treated as atavisms—as the vestigial tails of art, refusing to be lopped.

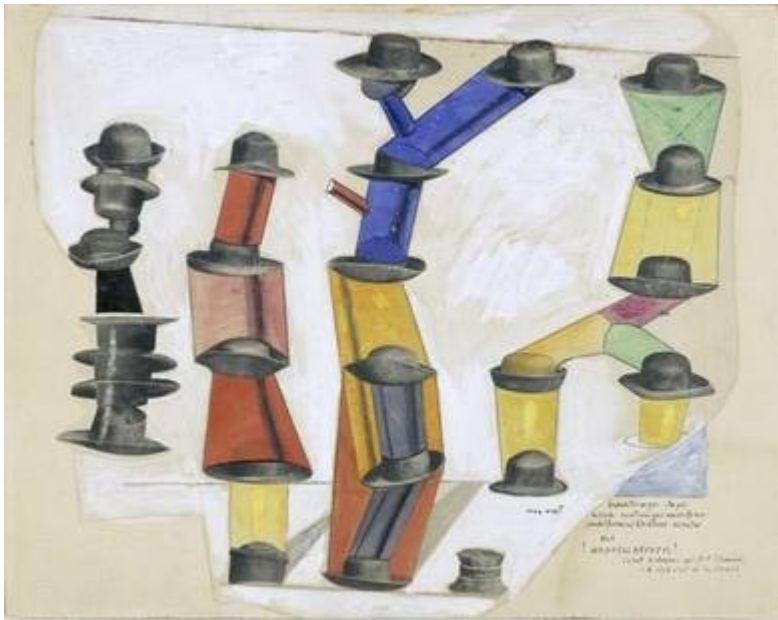
One of the greatest unrecognized facts of recent history is that the artist was the first enemy of Modern art. He is still its greatest enemy. His presence is what kept art from being completely monetized for centuries, and his continued existence is the one true danger to the current market. Every dollar and every drop of ink is therefore ultimately spent and spilled to annoy, deflate, alienate, and finally destroy every last artistic impulse in every last artist. Once this is achieved, the father and god will have been killed, and the children will be free forever.

Many or most will not understand what I mean by this, I know. I may seem to be taking it all a tad personally. To show you why I am justified in these feelings, it is best to go to the works of the Moderns themselves. So that no one may accuse me of selective editing, I will take all of the examples below from MOMA's own "highlights" reel, as chosen by its curators for the website.





I will start with Jean Arp's *Chance Collage*, a very famous work that any student of art history would recognize. It is just a handful of square paper scraps in a frame. This is a very early, very successful sharp stick in the artist's eye. It says to me, "Once this has been accepted as art, all skill, ambition, beauty, meaning and subtlety are right out the window." What is more, it was intended to say that. There is no other possible reason for its existence. No one could find it interesting for any other reason. Does anyone imagine that Arp actually found this assemblage poignant in any way? We can only feel pity for anyone who would look at this work and be aesthetically challenged. It is clear that the work is important because it is one of the most successful gauntlets thrown down to the artist. It works as a semi-powerful nullity. Its reach is defined by what it destroys. All of Modernism is finally judged in these terms.



Max Ernst's *The Hat Makes the Man* is another very clear example. There is nothing here that could be mistaken for aesthetics. Warhol's *Where's Your Rupture* is basically just a reworking of this nullity, where a stupid advertisement stands as the artist's entry in the most meaningless thing imaginable category. Why seek the most meaningless thing imaginable? To take the most wind out of those who seek meaning. Ernst says, "I am rich and famous and happy and clever by giving the world works like this. Why then seek meaning and beauty and depth? Your only reward will be a severed ear or abuse from the burghers."



A more recent entry in this game is Frank Gehry's *Bubbles Chaise Lounge*, a pseudo-sofa made by folding a large piece of corrugated cardboard. This would be clever in a 7th grade show and tell. In a museum it can only be understood as kick at the artist. In 7th grade, it would not have pre-empted high achievement. In MOMA, it does.

Jenny Holzer's intent may not have been as destructive as Gehry's, but her *Truisms*, a list of very uninteresting clichés, pre-empt real art just as successfully. *Truisms* appropriate level of publication and payment I would put at *Parade Magazine* and \$100. The idea is just that clever. Instead she has found space and fame through the top Contemporary museum in the country.

Similar in appeal and complexity is Lorna Simpson's *Wigs*, a collection of wigs worn by African American women. This would be a proper display at a cultural center, where it was treated as a cultural selection, not as a work of art. It would go up for a week or two, generate small interest (since it is

something that can already be seen on the street) and then disappear. Here it is offered to the audience as much more than that. Simpson becomes an artist, a person with vision. No doubt we will soon see a wig in the shape of an Absolut bottle.



Jean Dubuffet's *La Lunette Farcie* returns us to the old school of nullities, where artists actually spent a good deal of time constructing nothings. Here we have a "farcical" book—a collection of random words and completely accidental images that poses as a book. Unfortunately, it stands mainly as another proof that the Moderns have never understood the meaning of "farce." A farce is supposed to be a humorous absurdity, but the avant garde has so far delivered on only half that promise. *La Lunette Farcie*, like every other proposed farce of Modernism, fails to produce even the slightest grin. The only successfully humorous works of Modernism I have seen are works that were meant to be taken very seriously, like Picasso's *Guernica*. I laughed out loud in front of *Guernica*, to the astonishment of the room. *Guernica* is true farce: comically drawn figures trying to express the horrors of a mock bullfight—which is supposed to stand for the much greater horror of civil war. This is a rich absurdity, all the more so because it was, we must suppose, unintended. [Of course I know that speaking honestly about *Guernica* is seen as anti-social, maybe even suicidal. Drawing a mustache on the *Mona Lisa* is subversive. Subverting *Guernica* is forbidden. Subvert all tradition but our own, says Modernism.]



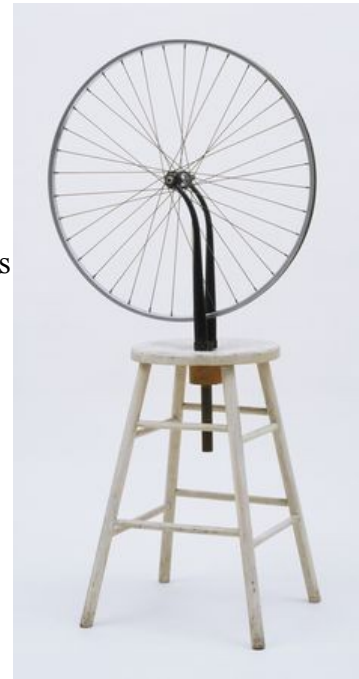
I am unsure whether Paul Klee's *Twittering Machine* is meant to be farce or nullity: it sits on the fence, almost being funny, almost being something. The only thing I like is the title, which is undeniably cute. The painting itself I don't get a twitter or a twitch from. It is a mostly banal design, indistinguishable from many another sofa cushion pattern or bath towel.



In the same vein we have Joan Miro's *The Birth of the World*, which is the birth of nothing but a few inconsequential shapes. A more poignant title might have been *The Birth of a Bad Haircut*. Likewise

for Mondrian's *Broadway Boogie Woogie*. It could have been titled *The Empire Bagged a Wookie* and no one would have been the wiser.

Marcel Duchamp's *Bicycle Wheel* shows off his incomparable ability to annoy the artist. Duchamp may be the single most influential figure in Modern art, due to his early recognition of the pattern. Why waste time subtracting this and that from the conventions of art? Why not do away with it altogether as an historical nuisance? The only problem with this is that he never understood the basic usefulness of an endless pointless variation of nothings. The only thing that is more annoying to the artist than non-art is the successful proliferation of non-art. In this and only this was Duchamp outdone by Warhol.



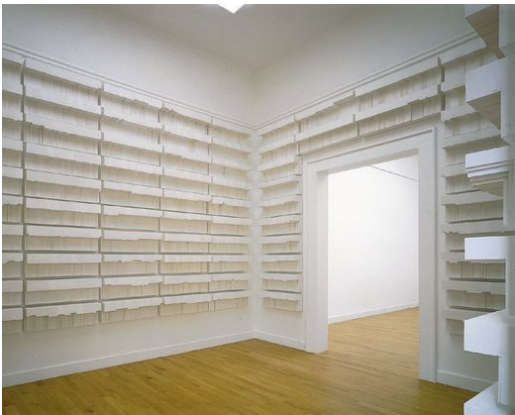
Warhol's *Gold Marilyn*, like his other most famous works, was not only a nothing, it was an easily reproducible nothing. Warhol's genius was in choosing meaningless objects that were already ubiquitous, so that the equation worked both ways. The everyday object became art and the art became everyday object. It was therefore in plain sight at all times, eating away at the artistic spirit, annoying the artist from every direction. No longer could the artist hide, refuse to go to the museum, refuse to



read the review, refuse to buy the book. No, the reminder was now everywhere. The cereal box, the can of soup, the washing powder—all of them became daggers, cutting artists everywhere. We bled from a thousand wounds, were infected by bugs of a million varieties. The very possibility of art became an impossibility. The legacy of Andy Warhol.



Louise Bourgeois benefited from this legacy, since she was never artist. Her entry in the highlights reel is *Articulated Lair*, a series of steel and rubber partitions that look like the changing rooms at Anne Taylor. This is what she had to say of it, “It’s a protected place you can enter to take refuge.” Maybe Louise felt protected surrounded by polished metal and rubber, but I would not. I might just as soon go for a sojourn at the airport lavatory, seeking spiritual comfort.



In this spirit of meaningless installations is Rachel Whiteread’s *Paperbacks*, a room full of empty shelves pressed in white plaster. Rachel is obviously still smarting from that honorable mention in the junior high science fair (along with Damien Hirst) and she is determined to force her mediocre ideas on us until we re-invite her to the prom. She is the one, I believe, who once took a mold of the empty space underneath a chair. . . and got famous for it. One begins to wonder how the artists who didn’t make the highlight reel must feel, being beaten out by someone who came up with the idea of sculpting negative space. It must be crushing to realize that your idea of nothing is inferior to someone else’s idea of nothing. At least Warhol and Duchamp could preen themselves on the idea that they won the anti-talent show. How discouraging it must be to find that your no-talent is 9th place or 23rd place in the list of no-talents. “I can’t even lose properly,” you would say to yourself.

Late in its career, MOMA discovered that it didn't even need to bother with buying things that posed as works of art. It could just exhibit ball bearings and coffee tables and Sony TV's and Pillola Lamps and save itself a lot of time and money. It was thought then that the Modern artist had finally finessed himself into obsolescence. Why pay a million dollars for a picture of a can of soup when one could be got for 79 cents? Why exhibit paintings of ballpens when real ballpens could be exhibited much more efficiently? Besides, the public as well as the curators could see that a design for a Jeep or a Swatch watch took some skill. Here at least were artifacts that were not absolute mockeries and absurdities. But, although these exhibits were popular, they did not stay at the heart of the Modern enterprise, which was to undercut all skill and meaning. This required real non-artistic intent, which required real non-artists. Designers were simply too close to artisans for comfort. MOMA has kept its ballpens as a sort of niggling annoyance to the high-minded everywhere. But the consensus was and still is that manufactured pieces of garbage like Nauman's *FACE MASK* must remain central to the museum's message. No real cultural artifact, taken from a real market, can hope to be as theoretically debilitating to the artist's psyche as an obscenely rich poseur. Fake artworks are not nearly as annoying when they are separated from fake careers and fake people.



I believe I could comment negatively on every entry in every category. Except for *Starry Night*, MOMA has a nearly flawless record of gravitating to bad work. Even the most popular pieces—a majority of which are technically pre-Modern—are vastly overrated. Degas' *At the Milliners* is not one of his best works, nor is Klimt's *Hope II*, nor is Rodin's *Balzac*. *Balzac* is a piece of sculptural laziness by a famous old man who was by then more interested in sketching the little kittens in embrace.





Cezanne's *The Bather* is further proof that the artist should have stuck to fruit. Dali's *The Persistence of Memory* is little more than a cheap gag.



Seurat's *Evening, Honfleur* has always impressed me as the highest achievement of his mechanized technique, a technique that led inexorably to the paint-by-numbers kit. In my mind, that airport lavatory where Louise Bourgeois huddles for spiritual consolation has a print of *Evening, Honfleur* next to the condom dispenser. The critics of the avant garde always have a field day comparing 19th century academicism to coffee can and tobacco tin art. But what could be more representative of the soulless mall shop poster than any painting by Seurat? Dali is a half-step up from this, decorating that cubicle space next to the fridge at the office, where half-drugged dayworkers can examine the philosophical conundrum represented by a rubber watch. These are the same people who find Star Trek Voyager plots

richly textured and are convinced that M.C. Escher has discovered the road to paradise with upside down stairs and hands that draw themselves.



If you want to see real art, you will have to go to the Metropolitan or the Frick. So as not to seem to be a complete grampus, I will close by recommending the works in New York City that I truly love.



First among these is Titian's *Man in a Red Cap*, at the Frick. Along with his *Man with a Glove* in Paris, this stands as one of the finest portraits ever painted. It is a miracle of coloring and shading. It is also a technical marvel, the paint layers not having suffered diminution in almost 500 years. Van Dyck's portraits at the Frick are equally fine. Several of Corot's landscapes owned by the Frick are among his greatest. At the Metropolitan is a marble head that most pass by.



It is *Head of an Athlete*, supposedly a Roman copy of a Greek original from the 5th century BC. It is one of the most beautiful heads ever sculpted. Sargent's *Gitana* is also very strong, overpowering his larger works there. Carpeaux's large marble group *Ugolino and his Sons* sits almost on top of the coffee shop at the rear of the building. Squeeze in behind the espresso machine and look at the younger children. Both the Frick and the Metropolitan have some very fine Rembrandts, the best of which may be the self-portrait at the Frick. And finally, I always visit the glass cases downstairs at the Metropolitan where less famous works are stored. In the sculpture cases are several astonishingly beautiful works in bronze and marble, by various artists. The works are only numbered, and I never remember to write down the names from the computer searches. But two or three among them deserve to find a place in the atrium, with large plaques announcing their proud creators. Almost any work in the case would be worth the entire Museum of Modern Art.

# **MoMA**

## *redux*

*by Miles Mathis*



I realized somewhat after the fact that I had failed to incorporate all my research into [my long article on MoMA](#) (which was assigned to me by ARC). In fact, as is my wont, I had simply begun writing and hadn't even glanced at my notes. In the end, the Muse did the writing for me and I just followed along on the keyboard. But when I was re-reading what the Muse had told us, I saw that a few things were left to be said. Hence this short follow-up.

Since all the articles I had read in preparation were about the architecture and the architect and the administrators and so on, I wanted my article to be about the art. My argument was therefore very thin on achitectural and administrative specifics. The first few paragraphs glossed my critique of the Modern museum in general, but did not really address the specifics of MoMA's renovation project. This should fill that gap.

The subtitle of the first article was "how to spend a billion and get nothing but new stairs." That billion dollar figure was obtained by taking MoMA's own total renovation estimate of 858 million and assuming that cost overruns would round it up to near a billion. The actual amount does not really concern me. I am an artist not an accountant: 858 million is already close enough to a billion to suit my math. The quip about stairs was to answer all the articles that had called the architect's approach a "shutes and ladders" design. I am all for shutes and ladders at Six Flags or a water park, I just don't think it is really a priority at an art museum. Think of it this way: as citizens of New York, do we a) spend a billion on new art, or b) spend a billion on shutes and ladders, and call it part of the experience of art? One answer is a rational answer, the other answer is the answer of people with way too much money and way too little art worth buying.

Another figure worth mentioning is MoMA's new admission fee of \$20. To put that in perspective, the Prado (the National Art Museum of Spain, and one of the great museums in the world) charges 3 euros, or less than \$4. The great museums in London, including the National Gallery, are free. In the US, the Metropolitan and the Chicago Art Institute are free (they request \$12, but they are required by statute to let you in for whatever you want to give them, including a stick of gum or a handshake). In contrast, the Guggenheim, another avant garde institution that rarely has any art on hand, charges \$18, take it or leave it. Saatchi Gallery, a private gallery in London that guarantees you will not have to look at any real art, is the worst deal in the civilized world. There you pay £8.75, or about \$17, to see about 1/20th the nothing you can see at MoMA. The fact that there are enough clueless tourists in London to keep Saatchi Gallery in the black is probably one of the things that led the administrators at MoMA to make the jump to \$20. I suggest they have still underestimated the gullibility of their target audience. If the people standing in line to get into MoMA are ignorant enough to think that ballpens and blank canvases are art, they are ignorant enough to spend \$40-\$50 as a fee, at the very least. Only P.T. Barnum could properly estimate the dollar value of the ignorance of such people.

[This is another reason to get Starry Night out of MoMA and into a sensible museum. I would love to pop in and see the painting from time to time. But \$20 to see it surrounded by fake art and fake people is too depressing. I will just live upon my fond memories.]

Also amusing is this quote from Mr. Gara, the chief operating officer at MoMA: "We debated the 'Chinese menu' approach [charging separately for various tours and facilities] but decided it was annoying." An institution whose charter is built on annoying the public suddenly discovers scruples in pricing. Once again, the unintended farces of Modernism are much richer than the intended ones.

Now let us move on to some quotes from the museum website, where the administration touts the renovation project. The very first line of a letter from the director Glenn Lowry reads,

Throughout its history, MoMA has used architecture as a vehicle for self-renewal and regeneration.

I hardly needed to accuse the museum of this when it admits it in the first line of its PR. No one seems to see what a strange idea this is, so I will hit it one more time. Using architecture as a vehicle for the regeneration of an architecture museum would make perfect sense. It would be a logical sentence representing a logical idea. But how can architecture be a vehicle for the regeneration of visual art?

Painting and sculpture can only be regenerated by painting and sculpture. Or, at worst, by videos, installations and concept pieces. But admitting that installations and architecture are different forms and different media, it makes no sense to claim that visual art can be self-renewed by architecture. That word "self" is the whole giveaway. A thing can be renewed only by forms of itself. It cannot be self-renewed by other things. It is like saying that earth can be self-renewed by water, or red paint be self-renewed by green paint. Green paint and red paint are related (even more closely than art and architecture) but one cannot self-renew the other.

The rest of Mr. Lowry's letter is equally absurd, as is the rest of the site's PR. This is the second sentence of the letter.

With this building project, the Museum undertakes the most extensive redefinition of itself since its founding over seventy years ago.

How, exactly, does moving into a new ugly building become a "redefinition"? They have the same art that they did 10 years ago, and (within a few percentage points) the same art they had 30 years ago. A new MoMA building is like Cheerios in a new box. It is "new and improved" only because they redesigned the box-top and the side panels. But the taste and the ingredients are the same. Just as with the Cheerios ad campaigns, the money is all being spent on packaging. Actually, Cheerios is a bad example, since we now have Honey Nut Cheerios and Apple Cinnamon Cheerios. MoMA hasn't even given us that much new product for our money. MoMA has basically put 12 ounces of old Cheerios in a 24 ounce box and asked us to pay double for the extra air (and some cool stairs).

Once you clear away all the promo and adspeak, the expansion at MoMA was about job creation for administrators and other middle-people. The last decade has been a decade of contraction in the museum market, especially in New York City. Except for the highly promoted mega-shows, attendance is down. The Metropolitan has seen a decline of over 20% in that time. This renovation at MoMA was a Keynesian remedy to that contraction. It was a beg to the private sector to continue to support the wage and number expansion in Modernism. Not a beg to support artists, few of whom will benefit from this renovation project, but a beg to support administrators of art. Almost none of that 858 million will go to buying or exhibiting contemporary art, since that is not MoMA's priority. This project was about architecture and "scholarship & outreach."

This is again from Mr. Lowry's letter:

Taniguchi's . . . design for the new Museum will allow MoMA to display its collections in fundamentally new ways and to offer greatly enhanced educational programming. In the new Museum, every space is either new or redesigned and equipped with the latest technology to provide the public with a richer and deeper experience.

And this is from MoMA's promo page:

The Museum's first stand-alone Education and Research Center on the eastern portion of the site will provide over five times more space for classrooms, auditoriums, teacher training workshops, and the Museum's expanded Library and Archives.

Notice the concentration on architecture, technology and education. Nowhere in the promotion materials, including the letter from the director, do we hear anything about art. By reading these materials, I could not discover that the museum had spent one penny on new art or new exhibitions of living artists. Nor could I possibly take any solace in all this "education", since I know that none of it will benefit any living or future artist. The avant garde curriculum is pro-artist to about the same degree that the Farm Bureau is pro-farmer or that the Bureau of Indian Affairs is pro-Indian. That is, it uses the title art only to generate business. Like Dostoevsky's Grand Inquisitor, these teachers and administrators of art destroy a thing in the name of that thing and call it progress. Art education is used to destroy the artistic impulse in the name of equality or equal-access. Art is subsumed and consumed by politics and literature and economics. For instance, look at these course descriptions for K-12 level classes at MoMA:

**Language and Art:** These lessons can include a literal examination of the language, symbols, and signs of art, or can focus on the interaction between literature, text, and art. Suggested lesson topics include "Telling Stories," "Narrative into Abstraction," and "Word Play: Text in Art."

**Society and Politics in Art:** These interdisciplinary lessons examine specific works of art in relation to the social and political contexts in which they were created. Suggested lesson topics include "Art and War," "Rise of the Modern World," "Art in the Machine Age," "Art and Politics," and "Art and Propaganda."

So much for "l'art pour l'art" [art for the sake of art]. It is clear that MoMA is not training artists or connoisseurs of art. It is training art critics. It is training writers and politicians and administrators who can continue to coopt art into their own career aspirations.

MoMA's alliance with PS1 is its only real connection to the exhibition of living artists. PS1 is an avant garde gallery and community outreach center with locations in Long Island City and Tribeca. PS1 does some good work with the homeless and the elderly, but its work would be even better if it weren't weighed down with false avant garde boosterism. Nor is it clear why an art center should be involved in social programs. Obviously it is filling a void left by the city of New York, but it would be better if art were about art and charity work were about charity work. As it is it is too easy for PS1 to use community service to prop up its other agendas, most of which are not so deserving of support. As far as its artistic agenda goes, PS1 is right on the cutting edge-- which means it is basically nowhere. It has its finger to the wind blowing from MoMA and the Guggenheim and the Whitney and ARTnews. It has its head so far up the institutions' shorts that it is unclear which appendages are arms and which are legs. Even given the exhibits at PS1, the benefits to artists are few. We are told, "since its inception [in 1976] PS1 has exhibited the work of more than 2,000 artists." Do the math and you find that is about 65/year or 5/month. Not so good, really. MoMA works with way over 65 critic-wannabe interns every year. A large commercial gallery works with more artists than that. And, it almost goes without saying, very few of the works at PS1 ever sell. The artists at PS1 get paid the equivalent of the interns at MoMA--nothing. But the interns have a fair shot at getting a job in the field eventually. The artists' odds are much longer.



Neither MoMA nor PS1 is really about benefitting art or artists. PS1 is a sort of artistic vanity press, where people who know the right people get to show their work before they go on to jobs in the "real world". There isn't much to differentiate the artists at PS1 from the homeless. Artists are basically one more category of the dispossessed, and they are thrown a crumb by the charitable people of New York City. But a much larger crumb goes to the administrators at institutions all over the metropolitan area. You don't have to buy very many works before you have a museum, and then you can hit up rich people or bored tourists to pay your salaries ad infinitum. Who gets endowed these days? Not artists. Museums and other institutions. Rich people used to be patrons—that is, they actually endowed individual artists. Not anymore. That was too time-consuming. It required that one actually meet artists and look at work and make decisions. It is a more efficient charity now to just give the money to a committee somewhere. They will disburse it for you while you choose the color of your Rolls Royce.

Once you crunch the numbers (I am almost an accountant here!) you find that artists are a miniscule part of the total art market. The architects are the major players now—why do you think Frank Gehry went into buildings instead of art? He doesn't do cardboard chaise lounges anymore; he does tinfoil buildings. He knows where the rich like to see their money go. They want BIG. Museum directors and curators are major players too—they make the big decisions. They get to lecture to the little artists. They help determine the market. They get big guaranteed salaries. A few "artists" are big names too, but they are just eye-candy. They don't make any decisions. They almost never open their mouths, except to say something paradoxical or spit into the fire or something.

But the big difference in total money spent and earned is determined by the size of the bureaucracy. Artists have no bureaucracy. For the most part, they either make it big or they don't make it. But art administration is a huge field, with subfields everywhere. Art history, education, museums, universities, publishing, magazines, endowments, and on and on. There are lots of jobs being an avant garde "arts professional." MoMA is the perfect example of this. Its budget is fat when it comes to renovation, administration and education (read indoctrination), but surprisingly skinny when it comes to being of use to living artists. MoMA spends more on utilities per month than it does on buying or exhibiting work by living artists.

This will become even more uneven as the oldsters—the Johns and Twomblies and so on--continue to die off. Why do you think the avant garde suddenly embraced John Currin in 2003, an artist they hated in 2002? They finally noticed that their last PC standards were creating a vacuum. They weren't creating enough stars to keep the game going. They needed to get someone's, anyone's, prices up to where he could be used as tabloid fodder. Currin had positioned himself perfectly as tabloid fodder. The only way he could have played it better is if he had been photographed shirtless or gotten arrested for public drinking or urination or married Angelina Jolie or Winona Ryder.

Avant garde institutions have become like charities, with the artists analogous to the wide-eyed starving children in Africa. These giant charities use artists as poster people; they use art as the excuse for the phone-banks; but art and artists do not actually benefit. The cargo plane flies over the sub-Saharan region and dumps a bag of back-issues of ARTnews and Whitney Biennial catalogs tied to a parachute.

They may also include a few empty tomato soup cans and Swatch watches as ballast. The wide-eyed artist is supposed to wave to his benefactors, who don't even bother to land.

Back home one or two plastic people who have artistic hair are made fabulously wealthy with, say, 1% of the total proceeds, and the rest goes to administration. In this way, art is not only like a false charity, it is once again like the lottery. What the public is shown in the lottery PR is the lucky winner who can now buy that lifetime pass to Graceland and a rhinestone jumpsuit for the dog. That millions of dopes are spending food money for gambling is not so visible. Likewise, the contributors at MoMA are shown all the glitz—the million-watt parties and the stories in the *New Yorker* and *Vanity Fair* and so on. What is not visible to them are the children being scolded for drawing from life (by teachers weaned at places like MoMA); also invisible are the university art departments where students collect the cast-off hair of gerbils and claim to have mastered an artform; and equally invisible, apparently, are their own homes, places rarely visited by the jet-setters and the office-dwellers. The only thing that could possibly cure such people of their chronic vulgarity, I believe, is if van Gogh or Gauguin or Cezanne or someone they claimed to admire could spend a day with them, giving them a guided tour of their own homes and offices and public buildings, informing them how catastrophically wrong they are about every last thing to do with art. Of course they could just read van Gogh's Letters, but that would require a level of auto-didacticism beyond imagining.

# *IN PRAISE OF MUD*

*by Miles Mathis*



*by Whistler*

In all beginner and intermediate painting classes, one of the biggest foes is what is called “mud.” This is the mud created by improper mixing of colors, so that the paint layer loses its intended color and value. I can’t defend an improper mixing, of course, but I do intend to defend the proper use of mud. The proper use of mud is the use of these browns and greys and dirty colors in a painting when they are needed. And they *are* needed, not just “at times”, but in all paintings.

Contemporary realists tend to flee mud at all times, and there are many reasons for this. First, after fighting against improper mud in school and in the early years, it is difficult for a painter to embrace proper mud later on. Young painters are taught to chase clean, clear colors, and as they get older they often come to the conclusion that cleaner is always better. The cleaner you are, the better painter you are. But this is false. Second, many realist painters come to gallery painting from advertising or illustration, where everything is expected to be sunny and happy and simplified and Disneyfied. They are taught or encouraged to oversaturate colors, key up everything, flood everything with light, and eliminate all shadows and ambiguities. Browns and greys are to be avoided, since browns and greys

don't sell products to shiny happy people. Third, since the contemporary realist market has already been Disneyfied, they find that the same applies to “high art” as to illustration or advertising. The shiny, happy people want bright, clean colors and sunny vistas. The artists don't realize, or prefer not to admit, that this means that “high art” is no longer really the product. They are not selling high art, they are selling illustration and advertising as easel paintings, that's all.

Next time you go to a realist gallery, look for browns and greys and dirty colors. You probably won't see many, if any. This is because most realists now consciously avoid browns and greys and all earth tones. The realist palette is not what it was 100 years ago, in the time of Sargent and Sorolla. Sorolla is considered not just a great colorist, but a high colorist. And yet his palette would be considered very drab by today's standards. The contemporary realist palette gets closer every year to what I call an “acrylic” palette. That is, a palette of bright plastic colors only, with no browns or greys. While the old realist palette consisted of yellow ochre, red ochre, and burnt umber, for instance, the new palette will have replaced these with cadmium yellow, cadmium red, and no browns at all. This gives the contemporary realist painting more color and saturation, but it also gives it a crushing lack of tonal complexity, a complete loss of subtlety, and an obvious shortcoming in color harmony.



Just imagine how keyed up a new colorist would make this scene.

All the great colorists and tonalists of history, from Giorgione to Whistler, understood that you have to play your colors off the browns and greys and blacks in the painting. Just as you can't have only browns and greys, you also can't have only the colors. If you want a richness and complexity to your paintings, if you want any kind of extended harmony, you have to have dirty tones as well as clean tones. The colors only read as pleasing if you surround them with less color. A harmony is created not just by balancing the colors in the painting, or by balancing the darks and lights; at higher levels, it is created by balancing the colors against the greys and browns. In other words, the eye must have places to rest

in the painting, otherwise it doesn't know where to go or how to construct the harmony.

Just as you can't have the same energy from corner to corner, you can't have the same amount of color from corner to corner. A painting is like a piano concerto: it must have some slow passages and some soft passages. It requires empty space as much as, or more than, it requires objects. And it requires low color as much as, or more than, it requires high color.

The ultimate reason for all this is that nature has decreed it. We are all children of nature, and our sense of harmony comes directly from her. Nature is full of color, but she is also a master of browns and greys and dirty tones. Even the blues in the sky are shaded off and dirty. The greens in the trees and grasses are soft and mixed, and the yellows are likewise low-toned. Every color is reflecting off every other color, and thereby diluting it. Why do you think the hazy harmonies of Leonardo or Chardin or Corot are so calming and transcendent? It is because of this reflective complexity. Or, to state it more directly, it is because they knew how to use greys and browns. They knew how to muddy their tones to the extent nature does, but no more.







This applies to skin as well as to trees and grass and skies. The pandemic problem with modern skin-tones is a lack of complexity and an over-saturation of color. All living beings are re-constituted mud, and we retain the browns and greys of that mud in almost all conditions of lighting. You cannot build a skin-tone from just red and yellow and white, although many try to. Nor can you build a skin-tone or shadow by mixing complementary colors. Skin is usually not that rich. Skin is almost always reflecting and absorbing browns and greys and blacks from its environment, not just the colors, so it can't be built from color alone. Van Dyck understood this. He was probably the best portrait painter of all time, and his paintings are very colorful, both in saturation and complexity. But he did not feel the need to oversaturate his skin-tones. A close analysis of his skin-tones will show that his shadows are often built mainly by adding black to his middle tone. This would be forbidden in a contemporary class, since most think it would immediately lead to improper mud. Many are taught never to use brown or black to darken a tone. And, admittedly, improper mud is often created this way. But Van Dyck showed it could be done. The difference between improper use and proper use is very small, and it is not a categorical difference of technique. In other words, you do not avoid or surpass improper mud by switching from brown and black to bright color, you surpass it by using the right amounts of brown or black in just the right places. The difference between improper use and proper use is one of precision. A great painter is

more precise than a lesser painter, not only in his line but in his color mixing.



Notice the forehead, where the shadow is made from black

The same problem is encountered by pastellists, and I have already commented on it in [my paper on pastels and subtlety](#). The contemporary pastellist is so afraid of mud that he will not allow himself to blend, for fear of creating an accidental brown or grey. Contemporary pastels are all about bright, clean colors. But this is precisely what keeps them at the Disney level of art. A real work of art requires these browns and greys. You should not avoid mud, you should learn its proper use. I often mix charcoal into my pastel colors, purposely to tone them down. This seems like blasphemy or counter-intuition to most these days, I know, but it is one way I create my subtle harmonies.





A critic will say, “That is all fine and good if you want to create sadness or melancholy, but if you don't, then you don't need browns and greys.” False once again, since using browns and greys is not a matter of a painting's emotional tone, it is a matter of a painting's complexity and harmony. Even happy paintings must or should have color harmony and complexity. Any painting, no matter its intended mood, will be richer and deeper and more real if its creator is in proper control of color. This is because all painting is a matter of technique, no matter the subject, and technique is not limited to good drawing, composition, lighting, color, or any of the other well-known factors. It is also a matter of some factors that are not so well-known anymore, and the main one is this one I am resurrecting. Color harmony is not just balancing color, it is balancing colors against lesser colors. It is balancing richer colors against muddier colors, and against browns, greys, and blacks. All the great “colorists” in history have proven this again and again. As another example, go to Titian, known as one of the best colorists ever. Titian's paintings are full of browns and greys and blacks and muddy colors. His beautiful reds wouldn't look nearly so rich if they were not playing off this background of the “less rich.” If you want to make a red look redder, you don't put it next to a bright green. You need some green in the painting, yes, but to make the red look richer, you surround it with browns and greys and muddied-up reds. Specifically, you take the red, mix it with green, and then place that red-grey near your saturated red. That is how you create the complexity.

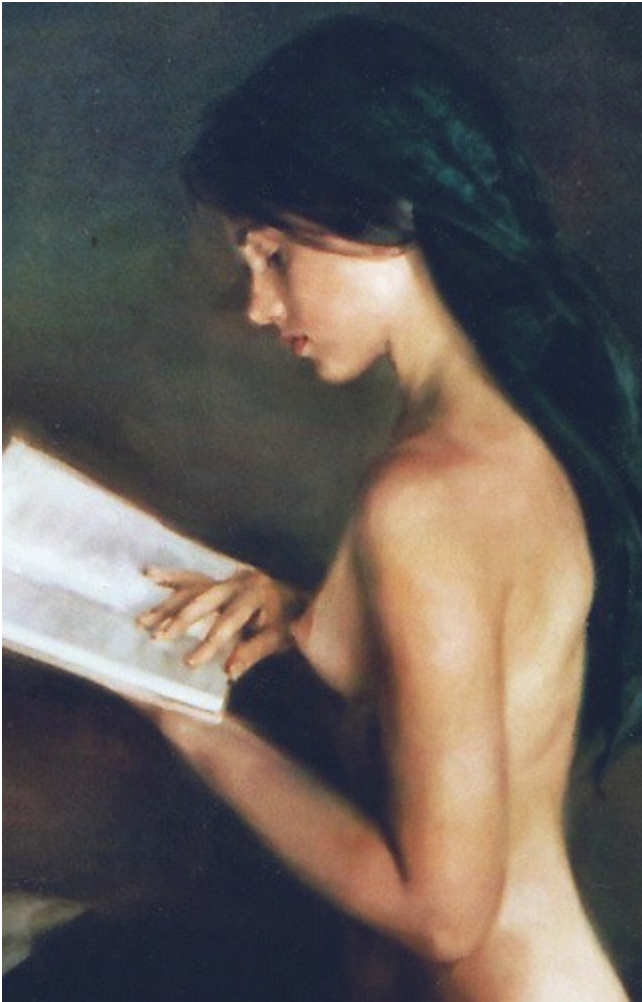


This is one of the (many) places that Pino always fails. Pino often uses reds to attract the eye, and he tries to enrich his red schemes by surrounding them with shaded-off reds. Unfortunately, he shades his reds off into pinks, by adding white to them. Instead of supporting his reds, this just dilutes them. He does not create a harmony or any richness, he just creates a pastel nightmare. He doesn't need pinks, he needs greys and browns that contain his main red. But, since his main red is often a cadmium red to start with, he can't create a natural mud from it. Cadmium is not a natural shade. It is ugly right out of the tube. Therefore any grey or brown made from it, or made to complement it, will also be ugly.



Pino's skin-tones are also pinkish here, for the same reason, and they fail for the same reason. Skin-tones must be created by using the correct mud, not by using some pre-mixed skin-tone from a tube. Either with oils or with pastels, this mud must be created fresh from the particular colors in the subject at hand. Readers will say, "Surely you don't add charcoal to your skin-tones, in a pastel!" Yes, I do. Just as Van Dyck often used black in his faces, I use charcoal in mine. You should be just as wary of using too much color as of using too little. Skin is very subtle, and a little color usually goes a long way. Charcoal also has almost no tinting strength, so it gets eaten up by the pastel. Mud is much easier to avoid in a pastel than in an oil painting.

But even in an oil painting, I use forbidden colors in the skin. To create complexity, I often start a skin-tone by using all the colors on my palette, or at least the ones that will be in the painting, including black. You will say, “Good Lord, why would you do that?” For the reason I mentioned earlier: the skin will be reflecting all the colors around it. Van Dyck used black in his skin precisely because his sitters were wearing it. It was there. Now, admittedly, I can't build a skin-tone by stopping there. All the colors together give me a brown mess: mud. But I don't stop there. I push this mud toward my skin-tone, adding red and yellow and white and whatever else I need, until I reach the shade I require. In this way my final skin-tone contains them all, without *obviously* containing them all. It is only very slightly muddy. This “very slightly muddy” is the same as “complexity.” It is the reason my skin-tone looks more like a real skin-tone, and more like an Old Master skin-tone.



White lead also helps in this regard. White lead has a lower tinting strength than titanium or zinc, and it is more transparent. I have recommended white lead in other places, due to its permanence and its warmth, but its main usefulness in skin is due to the fact that it doesn't overwhelm the colors it contains. It is more subtle. It carries the colors and lightens them without chalking them up like titanium or zinc does.

I use green earth for the same reason. You can put green earth in a skin-tone without turning it green. It adds complexity without causing improper mud. If my subject is surrounded by trees, for instance, I don't add leaf greens to my skin, I add green earth. Green earth is one of the ingredients of proper mud.

The same applies to red earth and yellow earth and the umbers. These are mud colors, made from real mud, and they have low tinting strengths. They are much easier to manipulate in skin than the stronger cadmiums. Cadmium is not a mud color: it is useful only for creating mannequin skin-tones. You don't even need it in the lips, where crimson is much better.





The plastic skin of Will Wilson

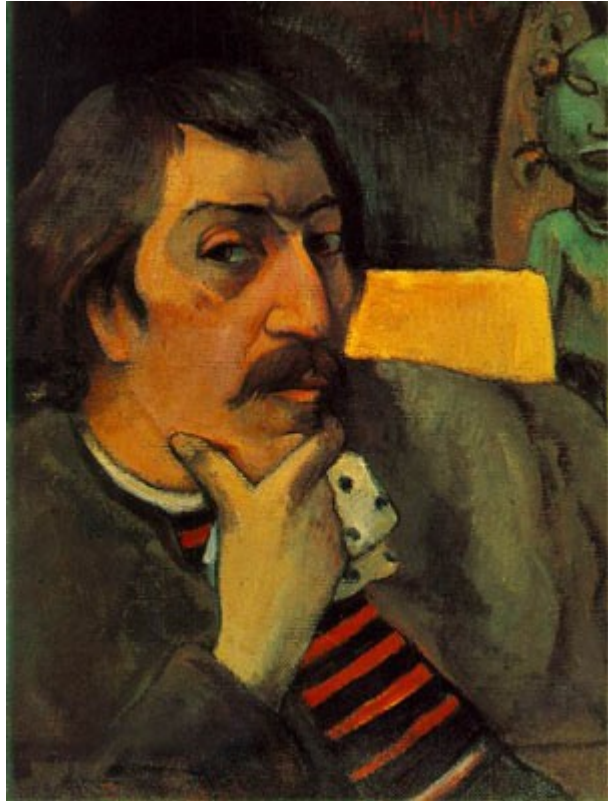
In the end, cleanliness is overrated in painting. You don't want a clean painting: you want to make a beautiful mess. Not only should you *not* avoid mud, you should create the correct and proper mud on purpose. A refined technique is precisely this learning to push your mud toward the tones you desire. This is what Whistler's emphasis on the palette came down to. He required his few students (like Gwen John) to mix their tones on the palette, before ever putting a brush on the canvas. The tones he told them to look for were these: he wanted a color trio that expressed the major tones of the canvas. But none of these three colors were clean colors. They were complex mixes to begin with. For instance, the

color trio might be a purple-grey, a pale yellow, and a grey-green. And each of the three would already contain a bit of the other two. In other words, the pale yellow might be greyed out a tiny bit by purple and green. But then, even after that, he would ask the student to create middle tones among the trio: to search for browns and greys between each trio combination, to use in the background. Gwen John's longsuit was her understanding of Whistler's method, which gave her paintings this complex harmony and calm beauty, despite her limited drawing skills.



It is well known that Impressionism overwrote and destroyed this deeper knowledge of color harmony, but many of the original Impressionists knew the laws and used them. Manet, especially, was a master of grey. His color use came down to him from Velasquez. Renoir and Morisot also ignored the rules of Impressionism most of the time, and their paintings are quite low- toned and grey compared to the new realists. Likewise Degas, who was a master of brown and grey and mixed tones. Even Gauguin still understood this, and he based his Tahitian harmonies on mixed colors, and color played off brown and grey.





New realists have uncovered many techniques of the past, but they have mostly neglected this basic understanding of the finer points of color harmony. And they have neglected the browns and greys for so long that the mainstream clients now find something strange and alien in a painting that has not been Disneyfied. The average painter and client and gallery owner's ability to judge has been limited by their experience, and any painting that does not look like the ones around it must be inferior. This turns not only history but the very idea of quality on its head, and I have actually heard modern people say that Pino is better than Sargent, since he is more colorful in an absolute sense. We can only pray to the Muses to arrive at the far end of this trend with our souls somewhat intact.

# *A Letter to the NEA*

*by Miles Mathis*



[poem by Dana Gioia](#)

Jan 20, 2005

Mr. Gioia,

I just read your pamphlet entitled "How the US funds the arts" and would like to make a comment. You

state that European agencies create insiders and outsiders, while the NEA does not. However, I also just read the grants awarded this year for the visual arts, and as a visual artist I must say that the awards do not bear out your statement.

Just like last year's awards and every years' awards for the last three decades at least, the list was a list of insiders. I am an outsider, so I should know. I am a realist. I do fairly well in the market now, so I do not really need a grant anymore. But I suffered through many years where even a tiny grant would have been helpful. I applied for grants in the early 90's. I also applied for other help at local and state levels, but received nothing but abuse. The universities ostracized me, the local arts organizations would have nothing to do with me, the newspapers were unfriendly, and the NEA also had no place for me. I am just one of thousands of realists who have been left out of the equation (purposefully) over the past half century. So, despite all its decentralization, the American system is fully capable of creating insiders and outsiders. The American avant garde is the most successful propaganda machine in the history of art, and it has controlled art with a firmer hand than any European agency ever dreamed of, including the Salon.

I was led to read this year's list of awards (despite the fact that I had given up long ago on the NEA) because I now work for the Art Renewal Center, the largest art website in the world. I write a weekly column for them on art and art criticism. The Chairman of ARC was very excited that the NEA had given grants for several museums to do shows of 19th century artists he admires. I was also surprised, so I looked at the grants given to individual artists, to see if any of my realist cohorts had received grants. Nothing in that direction at all, of course, I suppose because the committee for that category is different than the museum committee, or their standards are wholly divergent. NEA visual arts committees have long been openly hostile to realism. A small committee with a small budget can be just as partisan as a large committee with a large budget.

Realists have been forced to open their own schools due to the fact that the art establishment (which took over the universities years ago) is still so hostile to us. For instance, George Washington University just jettisoned its last classes in traditional drawing and painting--they were seen as outdated. The students there will no longer learn any craft at all. This is equivalent to students in the music department not having access to pianos or violins anymore, or students in literature not learning grammar anymore. We have opened our own schools, but we are still swimming against a brisk tide. The schools' enrollments are blooming, but all the institutions, including the media, are still against us. We don't get any public and very little private funding. "Pluralism" is inclusive of everyone but us, it would seem. We continue to exist only because we find buyers ourselves, usually without any help (even from galleries). But we can't go to the universities, we can't teach at the universities, we can't get grants at any level, we can't get into the major media, and (unless our last name is Wyeth) we can't get a museum show. And we certainly aren't picked to sit on NEA committees.

If you had any desire to do something about this situation, I could recommend several who are deserving of sitting on an NEA committee, including Nelson Shanks, Richard Schmid, Jamie Wyeth,

Paul Rahilly, Bo Bartlett, and many others.

As credentials for my opinions on art, including this comment, see below for links to my galleries and writings.

Miles Mathis

Jan 30, 2005

Dear Mr. Mathis:

Thank you for your thoughtful response to our monograph about how the U.S. funds the arts. I wanted to respond to a few points in your e-mail.

I'm not sure you know that we have not, unfortunately, been allowed by statute to fund individual visual artists for some time. Our current system supports state and local arts agencies that, in turn, support the artists in their community. The only individual grants awarded are in literature.

At the National Endowment for the Arts, we have tried to create an environment where each school of painting is represented in our panel system. Our panel system is the bedrock of how we distribute grants at this agency. We ensure that the panels have geographic discipline diversity. We ensure that we recruit new experts and laypersons for each panel cycle.

I thought you would be interested to know that a couple of naturalist visual artists have won the National Medal of Arts (administered by this agency), which is the highest public honor to artist in this country--Frederick Hart and John Ruthven, our contemporary Audubon.

My best wishes for your work,

Dana Gioia  
Chairman

Mr. Gioia,

Thank you for your response to my letter. I do realize that you do not fund individual artists directly. Unfortunately, that makes it even harder for marginalized artists, who are marginalized in the first instance at the local level. If an artist is not accepted as part of a local group then he or she cannot qualify for NEA grants, you see. When I was seeking grants I was in Austin, Texas, where all the local and state institutions were and still are avant garde. We realists made up our own little groups and gave ourselves titles in order to apply to the NEA, but we were never successful.

Your panel system may insure geographic diversity, but it hasn't been good at assuring true diversity. Pluralism has so far included everyone but us classicists. I seriously doubt that anyone on your panels is a classical or naturalist or realist painter, or connoisseur of classical painting. If they are they must be miserable, since they are sure to get outvoted everytime. All you have to do is look at the awards actually given. None in the last thirty years has gone to what we would call a traditional painter or sculptor.

Giving Fred Hart a medal after he has clawed his way to the top after a long and in many ways disappointing career (due to lack of opportunity) is not the same as supporting the sort of art he produced. A medal is nice, but its cash value and market value is almost nil. Medals like that are given to people that are already successful, therefore they do not change anything or encourage anything. Real painting and sculpture must have basic support--schools, markets, grants, etc. Currently they have a small piece of the decorative market and that is all. They have no institutional support. The universities are all owned by the avant garde, as are the top museums and galleries. The top magazines likewise.

We at ARC are trying to change this by opening our own schools, offering scholarships, organizing salons, and so on. But the support needs to be much broader. We have an extraordinary number of readers (some 5 million hits a month) but we still have few vocal supporters who are in positions of wealth or power or influence. The NEA, as a democratic institution, should be supporting the art that a majority of people would call art. If your panels were formed from any sort of referendum, we all know that 3 out of every 4 panelists would be realists of some sort. Why is it so hard for you to democratize a federally funded panel or institution? You and I both know the answer--it is only a concern of the right to move art in this direction, and art is not a priority for the right. [Strange fact: I am not on the right except in art--the only piece of the right's agenda I agree with is the democratization of art. I am on the far left but vehemently deny that art should be the political tool of the far left or anyone else].

It seems to me that you are in a position to kick these panels toward the center, and that is all I am suggesting you try to do. Your art, poetry (one of my arts too, by the way), is and long has been in dire straits. But you must recognize that its condition is still far superior historically to painting and sculpture. The avant garde has not been nearly as successful in de-conventionalizing or politizing or formalizing the thing you love most. You have not been forbidden to use words or to make meaningful sentences. Of course you are going to spend most of your energy talking about literacy--that is your own sacred cow--all the work you do is necessary--you are due all praise. But don't forget about us. The US has been completely illiterate to our art for decades, and that illiteracy has been just as damaging to culture as the illiteracy you fight.

Miles Mathis

*And a follow up letter:*

Mr. Gioia,

I just looked up John Ruthven's personal website, which lists his bio. I have no doubt that you are correct that he received the NMA medal, but it is interesting that he does not mention it on his site.

I also discovered that Frederick Hart was posthumously awarded the medal, which I find terribly sad. I am personally not a great fan of Mr. Hart's work, but it would be good for our movement to have some high-profile members who are not Wyeths (the Wyeths are very private: although they are great artists they are not what one would ask for in leaders). Mr. Hart can no longer be a leader for us, one way or another, and awards, which are about focusing proper attention if they are about anything, should go to the living. Our particular form of art already spends enough time looking to the past. The only place I could find mention of the Frederick Hart medal was on the NEA website. His bios at numerous websites do not mention it, although I realize it was quite recent (Sept, 2004). Hopefully they will update soon. If I had won the NMA I think I would have updated the next week, but possibly Hart's grievances against the NEA were even greater than mine, and I suspect that his friends and allies carry that grudge beyond the grave.

# ***THE NEA SHOULD BE ABOLISHED***

*by Miles Mathis*



**NATIONAL  
ENDOWMENT  
FOR THE ARTS**

After three decades of holding my peace, hoping the National Endowment for the Arts could eventually be of some use to real artists, I have finally given up that hope. It is Obama that has caused me to lose all hope, ironically.

This week, NEA communications director Yosi Sergeant was “reassigned” after the contents of a conference call were made public by one of the parties involved in that call. The conference call included the NEA, the White House Office of Public Engagement, and about 75 artists organizations throughout the country. In the call, artists were “encouraged to create works in their respective fields that would show support for Obama's domestic agenda in areas such as health care, energy and the environment.”\*

Since I am a lefty, an environmentalist, and so on, you will ask why I care. I care because I don't wish to see art turned into another arm of propaganda for the federal government and the masters of banking, oil, corporatism, and military who run it. I don't wish to see this under a Republican administration, and equally I don't wish to see this under a Democratic administration. About the only good thing that could be said of the NEA under Bush is that it was never coopted by the government directly. Bush and Cheney and his criminal cabal would certainly have used the arts as propaganda if they could have, but contemporary art had already been fully coopted by the left. The NEA would have successfully resisted any attempt at control by the Republicans, and the Republicans knew that.

For decades, the Republicans have dealt with the NEA by ignoring it, and by funding it in at the lowest levels they could get away with. But now, the Obama administration sees a use for the NEA. The NEA can be used as one more arm of the propaganda octopus. If the NEA proves useful and compliant in that role, then funding can be increased later.

Already, Obama is finding resistance to that idea. One of the artists in the conference call, Patrick



Courrielche, reacted like I am reacting, though it is doubtful that he is a conservative of any kind. Unless he was an undercover agent in a wig and mustache, it is improbable that the NEA would have allowed any conservative to take part in this upper echelon meeting. More likely is that Courrielche is one of the few on the left who has maintained a level of rationality over the decades, and he can see that propaganda is a danger to artists and non-artists, no matter which direction it is coming from.

My fellow artists and other progressives have long seen me as a traitor, and they no doubt see Mr. Courrielche in that light, too, now. They see this as the left's time to move forward aggressively, and since the right has never had any scruples, it is foolish for us to have scruples. After all, propaganda from the right can only be countered by propaganda from the left, right? If Mr. Courrielche and I are not with them, we are with the fascists like Republican senator John Cornyn from Texas, whose complaint in the Senate brought this to a head. I have been hearing that kind of argument since I got involved in these debates in the 80's. Back then I was told that Jesse Helms would agree with me, and that he would probably like my art, too. This is the level of discourse on both sides of the political fence. The left likes to pretend it inhabits some moral high ground, but it doesn't.

Well, I seriously doubt that either Helms or Cornyn would like my art, since it is unlikely that they have living rooms filled with nudes showing off furry bushes. But on this one issue, we do have some common ground. Cornyn has argued that the arts should be free of political manipulation from the White House, and it should. I don't see how any true progressives can argue that art should be manipulated by the federal government, or by any institution, for political reasons.

However, I will make some distinctions that neither the left nor the right ever make. One, Cornyn just happens to be in temporary agreement with me, and he is only in agreement by a sort of accident. His temporary lie puts him in agreement with my truth. Cornyn doesn't really have any problem with propaganda. If he did, he wouldn't be an agent of the current system, which survives with "all propaganda all the time." Cornyn's entire political life is nothing but a tissue of lies and spins. He only hates to see Obama trying to use the NEA for political gain, but he would have loved to have seen the NEA used for political gain by Bush. The Department of Homeland Security is a pure-bred agency of propaganda, created just for that purpose, and Cornyn supports it with his last breath. Both the Republicans and Democrats support it. If they didn't, they would abolish it. Neither party is against propaganda, they are only against one another's propaganda.

The same can be said for Glenn Beck, that master of propaganda. Beck, like Cornyn and the other neoconservatives who pay his bills, is a professional liar. But even professional liars occasionally get to speak a true sentence, if only by accident. Obama and Sergeant *are* politicizing art and art funding here, and that doesn't become false just because it found its way into Glenn Beck's nasty mouth.

As for the left or the self-styled "progressives", it is easy for them to accept manipulation from the White House, since political manipulation has been at the heart of the modern project from the beginning. Futurism, from 1909, was a movement of political manipulation, and the avant garde is still

mainly Futurist in its foundations. The major critics and academics have demanded that art be political, and the current magazines, shows, and books all continue to press that demand. All contemporary art is judged by its political relevance; all contemporary artists are manipulated from day one of their careers by critics and academics and institutions, so it is miracle, really, that Patrick Courrielche should have survived that initiation with any independence of thought.

Yes, what is most surprising in this latest story is that the propaganda *failed*. “Propaganda for the left” has been the definition of art for most of the last hundred years, so it is amazing that someone on the inside took exception to this conference call. The question, really, is how did someone who does not accept the current definition of art as politics get invited to be in this meeting?

The Clinton administration never attempted to politicize the NEA like this, but possibly that is because Clinton didn't appoint people to the NEA right out of this campaign. Clinton's biggest appointment was Jane Alexander, whom he appointed as director instead of Deborah Sale, a longtime friend and campaign aide. But Yosi Sergant was appointed due to his work with Shepard Fairey in creating and disseminating the Obama/Hope poster. In the conference call, the poster was used as an example of how artists can make a difference. Apologists for Sergant have claimed that the conference call pushed no legislative agenda, but whose environmental and energy policies were they talking about, then? There can hardly be anything like a non-partisan environmental or energy policy. Beyond that, Sergant has political ties other than to hip-hop. He has also worked for Yitzhak Rabin, former Prime Minister of Israel. If Sergant has no qualms about asking for art supporting Obama, we should expect he would have no qualms about asking for art supporting Israel. You see the steep slope we are on.

This is why these new leftists are not truly progressive. Propaganda is not progressive, and these ties between the White House and the NEA are not progressive. As I have shown, we have regressed even since the time of Clinton. With each decade, we are stooping further, which is regression, not progression.

The left wants to dismiss me and no doubt Mr. Courrielche for one reason: we disagree with the propaganda from the left. In their minds, if you are against propaganda from the left, you are on the right. Their thought processes are simple and reductive, and they cannot reason much beyond the length of their eyelashes. But the logic of the situation is with Mr. Courrielche and me. As with free speech, you cannot be in favor of free speech but against letting your opponent speak; likewise, with propaganda, you cannot be against political manipulation by your opponent, but in favor of political manipulation by your ally. It is a matter of consistency. The left is now just as hypocritical, inconsistent, illogical, and corrupt as the right. And that is why the NEA should be permanently put out of reach of both parties and both sides.

In the current political, intellectual and moral climate (which is neither intellectual nor moral), there is absolutely no chance that a government agency will achieve its stated non-partisan goal of helping people. Specifically, there is no chance that the NEA will be of any benefit to any real artist, by

encouraging him or her with prizes and grants to do truly exceptional work. The NEA, as it currently operates with regard to living artists and organizations, is not an enabler of excellence; like the Turner Prize in the UK, it is a tool for the continuing deconstruction of art and the artist. Since all critically viable art is now anti-art, the NEA must be anti-art as well. As long as art history remains in this destructive cycle, a government agency for art can only be a misnomer and a nuisance and a financial drain upon the taxpayer. If it also becomes a tool of propaganda, it will be doubly destructive.

*\*<http://www.foxnews.com/politics/2009/09/11/nea-reassigns-communications-director-following-uproar-obama-initiative/>*

# *Article submitted for "My Turn" - Newsweek, 2001*

*by Miles Mathis*



Van Gogh gets a lot of press these days. And deservedly so. I wish I could send him a scrapbook. Or a few billion francs. He had such need of them once, when things were tight—on those days when he had to survive on "twenty-three cups of free coffee." But what is not generally understood is that, as bad as things were for him in the 1880's, they would be worse now. We have learned nothing from art history.

Whenever I say that the problem with art now is that non-artists are in control of it, I am always asked, "But hasn't it always been that way?" And I answer an unequivocal no. It hasn't. Artists have always had to fight, yes. Michelangelo argued with the Popes. The Impressionists argued with the Paris Salon. But they won. An artist hasn't won a battle with criticism or curators or the markets since before Picasso. Whistler was probably the last artist in history to have any success arguing with the writers and academics. That was also around 1880.

Everyone who knows Picasso's biography knows that he was famous because he lost to the critics, and lost gracefully. As he said, "I have satisfied these gentlemen and the critics... and the less they understood the more they admired. I am only the entertainer of a public which understands its age." Art in the 20th century has been defined wholly by writers. Roger Fry, Clive Bell, Gertrude Stein, Clement Greenberg, and so on. These are the true inventors of Modernism. The artists after Picasso were too busy reading the papers to listen to the Muse. And once the analysts got control of art, art became

analysis. "Art" became synonymous with "thinking about art."

It was not always like that. In fact it was never like that until a hundred years ago. Imagine Leonardo or Michelangelo, or even Rodin, being interested in "flatness" or "minimalism" or "deconstruction" or any of the various non-artistic absurdities of the 20th century. The argument that makes a single straight line on a giant canvas a work of art, or that makes a found commode one, would have been beneath contempt for these artists. They needed no verbal explanations or apologies for their art. They were not interested in intellectual quibbling: they could create art.

Arthur Danto, the current art critic for *The Nation*, said in one of his books, "Until one tries to write about it, the work [of art] remains a sort of aesthetic blur." This puts the problem into high focus. Mr. Danto's remark is symptomatic of a society that has forgotten what art is. Art is not an idea. It is an emotion. The more you can talk about it, the less it is art. Before the 20th century, art was always arrayed in mystery; criticism cannot abide mystery. Art springs from the imagination, its consorts symbol and myth. It resonates through the limbic system, surrounded by dreams. But criticism is born in the frontal lobes, circumscribed by language and reason. Great art reveals itself only to the extent that a great artist chooses to reveal it. No less, and no more. More explication can exist only at the expense of the art.

But all this is ignored. It is inexpedient. It is not properly inclusive. It does not create jobs. And an artist who complains of the presumptions of criticism is dismissed as anti-intellectual, if not ignorant. Or he is shouted down. Outnumbered in oceans of words. Drowned in a river of ink.

Today theory remains the dominant faith, the critic its high priest, "relevance" its current shibboleth. The market arrays itself around "the word." And there is far more money in art administration than there is in art. At the university, our art history departments dwarf our art departments. Which department do you think produces "art experts"? The irony is so huge it overwhelms the eyeballs and becomes invisible, like an elephant seen through a microscope.

I am told, in response, that "realism" is making a comeback. But there are two and only two markets for art in this country. There is a market for decoration and there is a market for social activism. No one would know how to look at a work that did not satisfy one of these market demands. "Realism" has split precisely along these lines. If it is pathological enough, like Lucian Freud or Odd Nerdrum, it is given an "activist" slot. It is explained politically or psychologically, as a "hammer" against the status quo or whatnot. Everything else is sold as decoration, and is completely dismissed by criticism. But Van Gogh did not paint for either of these reasons. He said, "Better a little wisdom than a lot of energetic zeal." And this:

We are in the midst of downright laissez-aller and anarchy. We artists, who love order and symmetry, isolate ourselves and are working to define only one thing.

These sentiments are completely pre-modern. Van Gogh painted exactly what he wanted to paint, with no concern for the fashions of the art market or of the needs of the critics or curators. And so he was ignored as a fool. And so he would be ignored today even more, if he were shambling around toothless somewhere in West Virginia or Western Ireland, painting irrelevant "things." Van Gogh existed on the outskirts of a dying star, the light and warmth of Rembrandt and Delacroix and Millet still warming him. Now he would have to survive on the edge of a black hole.

Ask yourself when was the last time an artist wrote or spoke of art theory? Any artist who speaks against the avant garde is assumed to be reactionary, an accomplice of Helms or Guiliani. But my heroes are Noam Chomsky and Wendell Berry and Faye Wattleton. I am working for the Green Party. Things are not as tidy as most would have them. The truth is that art cannot take direction, from the right or the left. Art is a gift of the Id, not a prescription or proscription of the Superego. That is to say, at its best, art is a private passion, not a public mission. Unless we relearn that, art will continue to be shock and spectacle rather than subtlety and depth.

# *The National Portrait Competition*

*by Miles Mathis*



*by Richard Weaver*

Several years ago when I was still writing for the Art Renewal Center, someone who had been posting negatively on the Goodart Forum wrote me a personal email, demanding to know “how I could work with the Republicans?” She implied that, in art, I should deal only with the left. My answer was that you can’t blame the right for the fact that the left doesn’t support realism. The right will support realism in its own way, I said, and we should be careful what we wish for when we wish the left would notice realism. The right is politically intrusive in some ways, but when the left enters the game, look out: art will be completely swallowed by politics.

Well, the left has finally decided to notice realism and portraiture, and the nightmare has begun. The avant garde is, even as we speak, engulfing realism and portraiture, hoping to coopt what everyone sees as growing markets for both. It has mobilized its million-(wo)man army of art administrators, curators, critics, historians, editors, and miscellaneous staff and the march has begun on a hundred fronts. All of New York City is afoot and abuzz, working overtime on the new job. It is only a matter of time before every possible word is written, every possible lie told. Soon the trees will be stripped bare of leaves, all fruit and flesh will be digested, and all sources of income, subsidy, or charity will be arrogated.



Nor is New York City the only headquarters. One important front opens its doors upon 8<sup>th</sup> Street in Washington, D.C. These are the doors of the National Portrait Gallery, where the new National Portrait Competition is being held. The call for entries went out in late 2004, and when I first heard about the Outwin Boochever Portrait Competition my first reaction was, “At last!” But then my brain turned on again (can’t seem to keep that from happening) and I thought to ask, “Who are the judges?” When shown the list my heart sank. I said, “That’s trouble.” And once again I have been proven correct. I chose not to enter, and now that the winners have been announced, I am glad I didn’t.

But first a bit of background, both on the prize and on myself. This Portrait Competition is the first one in the US run by a national institution. It was explicitly modeled after the British Petroleum Prize given by the National Portrait Gallery in London. The Outwin Boochever offers a first prize of \$25,000 plus a future commission to paint a famous person. There are also much smaller second through seventh prizes.

The BP Prize in London is worth 25,000 pounds (not including the similar commission), which is about \$46,600. Considering that the US is a much larger and wealthier nation than England, it looks bad when we can muster only 53% of the support for art that they do. At least we don’t have to have an oil company’s name attached our portrait prize, but we do apparently have to have a bulky sponsor’s name. Nothing is just what it is anymore.

Since I am about to attack the left with both barrels blazing, I feel I must remind the reader once more that I am so far to the left in so many ways that I can’t stand to vote or live in the US anymore. I am an expat now living in Belgium. I am an environmentalist who used to canvas for Earth First and I still carry a Greenpeace card in my wallet. I worked for Nader in 2000 and kissed the Democrats a final goodbye for their treatment of him after that election. I am anti-growth, anti-business, I hate cars, gadgets, and all plastic. I am pro-feminist (although I have attacked some of the nastier manifestations of feminism in my writings), I am pro-Union, I think Leonard Peltier should be freed and the Native Americans should be given back large parcels of land, good land that they can hunt on. I read and admire Chomsky, and I think our foreign policy has always been no less than criminal. When the Hezbollah says it will disarm when Israel disarms, I agree with them (this despite the fact that I have many Jewish friends, think that Israel has a right to exist, and am generally pro-Jewish on other topics).

I made this list not to bring up any of these subjects for discussion or to sell myself to anyone (obviously), but only to prove that I am not any type of political conservative, by the current definition of conservative. What I am about to say about the portrait competition will cause almost everyone to label me a neocon, and I want to be sure that this is impossible from the beginning. The only conceivable way I could be called conservative is due to the fact that I think politics in art is basically misplaced. I think conservative politics in art is misplaced and, equally, I think liberal or revolutionary politics in art is misplaced. It is all shallow, inflammatory, and aesthetically offensive. Politics in art is necessarily banal, quotidian, and vulgar, and it guarantees that the art in question will have a shelf-life of no more than five years. A work of art that is political is like a newspaper or current-events post on the internet: it addresses a topic of the day and then it is justly forgotten.

This doesn't really make me conservative, since the right doesn't agree with me on this. The right thinks that left politics is propaganda and that right politics is truth. The left also thinks this about itself. For the left in the US, Hitler's propaganda was propaganda, but its own propaganda is purified by being correct. But for me, art has nothing to do with politics or even truth. I don't want to see paintings that I agree with any more than I want to see paintings I disagree with. I don't want to see paintings that require agreement or disagreement, I don't want to see paintings that ask me questions or that "make me think". I do not need to be made to think. I do plenty of political thinking without being cued in infantile ways by cutesy or brutal or even earnest paintings. For me, the best art is and always has been personal, not political.

As proof of this, I remind the reader that I critiqued Tim Tyler's painting *Deconstruction* from the 2005 ARC Salon for its political content, even though I agreed with his content. If Tim had just written a sentence on a piece of paper that said, "I think Warhol was a phony and I think deconstruction is usually a load of horse manure", I would have answered, "Yeah." But when he dressed that sentence up as silly political painting, one that had no more depth or lasting impression than that one sentence, I said I thought his effort was wasted. Writing the sentence takes ten seconds. Painting the painting took many hours. I would not pay a nickel for the sentence, but Fred Ross paid \$31,000 for the painting.

All this goes to say that when I saw that most of the jurors at the National Portrait competition were upper echelon "arts professionals", I saw a big red flag. I knew that these people had swallowed the political pill decades ago when they were in college, and that the pill had lodged in their guts, taking on more moisture with each passing year, expanding until it filled their entire thorax. By now they would be like a snake that had swallowed a sheep—just a stomach with eyes. They would see nothing but politics.

This was also true of the one artist on the panel, Sidney Goodman. Mr. Goodman was chosen as a representative of the club that includes "Lucien Freud, Duane Hanson, Alice Neel, Chuck Close, Philip Pearlstein, and Alex Katz." Well, I don't respect any of these people as artists, so why would I want to enter this competition? They all got famous during the heyday of Modernism and their work is defined (and in my opinion destroyed) by the politics and theory of the time. Their work was never much about their subject, it was always about their *attitude* toward their subject; and their attitude never had any greatness in it, on purpose. Van Gogh's work is mostly attitude, but Van Gogh was an extraordinary man. Frida Kahlo's work is mostly attitude, but Kahlo had greatness in her. The people listed above do not. A couple of them are vile and the rest are just boring.

This means that the art administrators who are the other jurors—who compiled this list of artists that is supposed to be impressive—must also be either vile or boring or both. I have always asked myself what kind of person could see something in an Alex Katz, and here is my answer: these people. These people see badly painted heads emptied of all emotion interesting. Carolyn Carr, Trevor Fairbrother, Brandon Fortune, Thelma Golden, Marc Pachter, and Katy Siegel think that the artists listed above are great, they think that politics in art is a requirement, and they think they are qualified to judge art despite the fact that they are not great artists. They think that it makes sense for them to judge this competition, since (as I have heard one like them say) they are "in control of our artistic future."

I also quote this list directly from the catalog to show you not only who it contains, but who it does *not* contain. It does not contain any of the heroes of mainstream realism like Schmid, Leffel, Greene, Shanks, Terpning, Steinke, and so on. I am not saying they are *my* heroes, I am just pointing out a fact. But surely the biggest purposeful omission is Andrew Wyeth. The catalog takes some small pains to make the reader think this is a National Show, which would be an inclusive show, a bi-partisan show at the least. “Pluralism”—the latest empty theory of art—also spreads this lie of inclusion. But these administrators and judges can’t even include Wyeth in a short list of 20<sup>th</sup> century figure painters. This is a red flag that couldn’t be any taller or flap in the wind any louder.

Here are some more red flags. On page one of “About the Competition”, we are told that the jurors will focus on “innovation and excellence.” Not excellence and innovation, but innovation and excellence. That was no accident, dear reader, since one paragraph later, when all the names above are being dropped, we are told, “Freud...Katz all made innovative and compelling portraits.” In this sentence the order of adjectives makes some sense: these artists are sometimes innovative, less often compelling, and never excellent. But in both sentences we are being explicitly cued to a fact: innovation is more important than excellence. Whether you are left or right, you might ask yourself if you agree with that.

Another red flag: despite the fact that Ms. Outwin Boochever has supposedly underwritten this event, in order to attach her name to it *in perpetuum*, artists must still pay \$25 to enter one jpeg. With over 4000 entries that comes out to receipts of over \$100,000. Subtract \$37,000 for total prizes, and you still have something like \$65,000 in the kitty to run the show. The museum covered shipping both ways for the 50 exhibitors, but that is still only about \$10,000. The museum doesn’t have to pay rent, obviously, and the museum already has a large paid staff, an advertising budget, a utilities budget and so on. It looks to me like the museum actually made about \$50,000 in profit (not including catalog sales and non-jpeg entry fees, which might add another \$25,000). They will say that the administrators and judges had to be paid for their time, but that is no argument. If they got paid for it, then they profited from it. They can hardly get paid and claim they did not profit from it. These competitions like to imply that this is all charity work, but art is not a charity, especially when you are charging the artists an entry fee. The National Gallery has to fill its rooms somehow, and if it is not filling them with contemporary portraits it is still paying a staff and turning on the lights and aircon with tax dollars to exhibit something. This way the administrators can administrate, get paid by taxpayers, artists, and Ms. Outwin Boochever, while making it look like art history is the big beneficiary. With administrators like these, I guarantee you that art history and artists are not the beneficiaries of anything.

For example, look at the calendar of the show. It took 10 months for these administrators to do their administrating. The deadline for entry was September 6; the show opened in July of the next year. That is astonishing. These people must have been paid by the hour. They could not have worked any slower if they were working at the post office. What I would like to see is an accounting of where all the money actually went. You can be sure that only a tithe of it went to any artists. The rest of it was gobbled up by the art administration bureaucracy.

In fact, private galleries and organizations run shows like this all the time, make a profit, and don’t require underwriting from people who might demand that their name is attached to the show. *And* they

do it in just a couple of months. Greenhouse Gallery in San Antonio runs a yearly Salon that does most of what this National Portrait Competition does, without a major underwriter. So do the Oil Painters of America, the Portrait Society, and so on. They do this in the same way the Boochever has done it, by charging an entry fee. Their judges are of a different stripe and the prizes are a bit lower, but otherwise it is the same. The big difference is they don't try to make it seem like the whole thing is charity, or subsidized privately or publicly. Everyone knows that it is basically a small lottery, where everyone puts some money in a hat and the winner is paid from that hat.

Make no mistake, I am not holding up these other realist shows as stellar examples of anything, except maybe efficiency. I don't enter them either, since they are all poorly judged and full of insiders and cliques. But I will say that the attitudes, politics, and overall falseness and vulgarity of these shows pales in comparison to what we have seen at the Outwin Boochever. Anyone who imagined that the left would ride in and clean up realism, or put it on a higher or firmer ground, must now be taking anti-depressants.

If the National Gallery can't run the show with a \$100,000 hat and government provided walls and utilities, then it is probably over-administrated. Meaning that the Outwin Boochever subsidy is just a smokescreen. They needed the entry fee simply because they already spent the entire Boochever subsidy on administration, before the thing even started. Ask yourself why an exhibition like this needs seven judges, six of them non-artists. Ask yourself why it needs to pay Dave Hickey to write absurd and meaningless stuff for its catalog when it already has six other writers working as judges on the project, all of whom have proved themselves geniuses at producing absurd and meaningless art criticism.

It did all this because this show, like the rest of contemporary art, is first and foremost a make-work project for art administrators. All of contemporary art is a vast subsidy for these people. They are the beneficiaries here. One painter, David Lenz, made \$25,000. That's pretty good, but it is still small potatoes (compare it to what a private realist show—the Hubbard Award—paid to its winner ten years ago: \$250,000). The rest of the artists won nothing or next to nothing. Unless they want to paint boring corporate portraits, this show will likely mean nothing to them, financially or artistically. It may be that David Lenz is not even interested in painting a famous person, for instance. The exhibition catalog asked artists to enter a work of someone close to them, but then it assumes that the winning artist will jump to paint a famous person. It will be rather embarrassing if Mr. Lenz looks at the list provided and just hands it back. Embarrassing yes, but I look forward to it, since it would be the only genuine thing connected to this whole event. The organizers want to look brave for facing Down's Syndrome and 9-11 and so on, but they haven't had the foresight to see that someone who enjoyed painting his son might not want to paint either Bush or Clinton or Cher or Tiger Woods.

While a couple of artists may benefit in the long run from the exposure, it is the administrators who are guaranteed the benefit. It is their salaries that are being paid here. It is their club that is the primary one, and they are the only ones that are guaranteed to be part of the next round. Wherever there is administrating or judging or writing to be done, wherever empty sentences must be concocted, wherever logic must be ignored, wherever careerism must be defended in the name of equality, they

will be there, talking loudly about art for gays, art for women, art for the dispossessed, art as therapy, art as empowerment, art as relevance, art as relativity. And just as surely they will be attacking beauty, skill, talent, white males, the patriarchy, hierarchy, and the past.

Let me take the hottest sentence in that last paragraph and expand on it. I know from experience that most people on the left will purposely fail to take my meaning when I say, “art for gays, art for women. . . .” They will get huffy and say, “What do you have against gays and women?” I have nothing against gays or women. The sentence does not imply that I do. The sentence says that I have something against art for gays or for women, which is an entirely different thing. If I have something against political art, then of course I am going to have something against hot-button issues in art, whatever they are. As an analogue, I am also not interested in “art for men,” if that is taken politically. I am not for art that is “pro-male.” I simply don’t want to be preached at when I am looking at art. And I don’t want to preach when I am making art. I save my preaching for times like this. So if someone expects to be interesting just because he is gay or painting about gay rights, or because she is female and painting about feminine issues, that person is aesthetically deluded. I don’t want to look at pro-Arab art, pro-Jewish art, pro-Jesus art, or pro-Satan art. For me, political art is an oxymoron, like dry water, or cold fire. I would just as likely go to Fifth Avenue at rush hour to take a nap, or go to Oslo in winter to get a suntan, as I would go to art in order to think or be challenged. Not because I am stupid, scared, unrealized, or uneducated, but because I am capable of making distinctions that the agenda-inebriated apparently cannot make. They want politics morning, noon and night, they want to butter their bread with it and put it in their coffee and use it as a pillowcase. They want to play with it in the bathtub and mold it into a sextoy. They want to mow the lawn with it and pray to it in the cathedral. But my eyes are clear enough to see this as insanity. I like sugar and put it in my tea. But I do not put it on my pizza or in my beer. Nor do I find it liberating to redefine night as day or green as blue or sour as sweet. Politics is one thing, art is another, and only a fool would confuse the two.

Not only that, but I know that most non-indoctrinated people agree with me. Visual art, do to its forms and limitations, is suited for some things and not for others, and most people have an intuitive understanding of this. If you had to convince someone to agree with you on a given issue, in a life and death situation, in five minutes, you wouldn’t use art to do it. You would talk to them, face to face, in spoken sentences. If you had 20 minutes and couldn’t speak, you would write it down. But no matter how much time you had, you would not draw them a picture. If you did, it would surely be a sort of “Pictionary” picture, and it would not qualify as art. It would be a utilitarian scribble, with no aesthetic content, no emotional content (except maybe anxiety and impatience) and no long-term value.

Only very confused people in a very confused society would go to art to for politics, especially when they can get that politics everywhere else. It is like going into a church and expecting them to sell cigarettes, tennis balls, and slurpees. There is no hard and fast rule that says a church *can’t* sell slurpees and dingdongs and razorblades and lotto tickets. There is nothing in the definition of “church” that forbids it. If we all agree to it, legally and morally, then it may happen. But why turn the church into a minimart when there are already minimarts on every corner? Equally, why go to art for politics?

But this is precisely what these administrators have done to art. Take Trevor Fairbrother, one of the jurors, as an example. He is most famous for outing Sargent in his book *The Sensualist*. It wasn't enough to judge Sargent as an artist; he had to be judged for his sexuality, since this was the only "left" politicization possible with Sargent. Before this book, Fairbrother never showed any interest in painting as painting or art as art, and he certainly never showed any interest in 19<sup>th</sup> century realism of any kind. He interviewed Warhol in 1987 and organized the Warhol/Beuys exhibition in Boston in 1991. Normally, those who find Warhol and Beuys fascinating are not too interested in painting as straight representation, or painting as non-pathological emotion. In fact, Fairbrother implies that until Sargent was outed he was not relevant. In her *ARTnews* review of the book, Patricia Failing confirms that Sargent was previously considered to be "slick, superficial, and antimodernist." Now simply by being gay he is suddenly "more complex and challenging."

That kind of thinking should be transparent and offensive to any intelligent person, whether they are gay or straight, right or left. A person should be judged irrespective of their sexuality. I thought that was one of the central tenets of the progressive movement: being non-prejudicial. Post-judging Sargent positively because he was gay is no better than pre-judging someone negatively because they are gay. Both are illogical and unethical.

Now let us go to the paintings themselves. All the awards and commendations seem to have been awarded more to the accompanying blurbs than to the paintings. The first blurb, by the artist David Lenz, is about Down's Syndrome and it ends with this: "He [the artist's son Sam, subject of the painting] really does have an important message for everyone to hear." That message is that "perfection is overrated." Another part of that message is that we should shun "models and supermodels" (not just models or supermodels, notice, but *both*) for being "tall and impossibly fit". Another is that the boy is the "tutor" in this "revealing examination of this civilization man has made for himself."

The well mannered people of the past may have been mistaken in any number of critical ways, but one thing they understood is what poor taste it must seem to use your own challenged son to score points with a jury. I was left thinking that the artist requires only a tear-inducing soundtrack and he has an Oprah show.

If I resist being tutored by critics and other experts, none should be surprised that I resist being tutored on "civilization" by five year olds or their manipulative fathers. This civilization that man has made for himself certainly requires a load of examining, but even when the examination is over and everyone is in perfect harmony, parents are still going to hope their children are not born with Down's Syndrome. It is just delusional to suggest otherwise.

Given the complaint of the artist, the question is, what can be done? The suggestion contained in the blurb is that because a couple of people at the hospital where Sam was born were insensitive, we should hate models and supermodels for being tall, fit and beautiful (and, by extension, I assume, anyone else who is tall, fit or beautiful), look askance at people who want to solve problems (since they want a "perfectable" world) and re-examine all of civilization. Wouldn't it be more sensible to get the nurse fired, tell the nosy neighbor to bugger off, and get on with it? Besides, the nurse and nosy

neighbor are ignorant and presumptuous *because* they are imperfect. Dad can overlook his son's imperfections, but the imperfections of nurses and ignorant neighbors cannot be forgiven. This blurb only looks warmhearted and accepting until you unravel it a bit. As an example of psychology it is just a little note of veiled aggression. These jurors are masters of deconstruction when it suits them, but when they want an easy tear they are dense as lead.

Beyond that, I question the authenticity of the backstory. This artist, Mr. Lenz, claims that a nurse asked him if he was going to keep the child. Where was this hospital? Auschwitz? Is he suggesting that she was suggesting he had another option? People can be insensitive, and nurses especially, but this takes some believing. True or not, I can see why Mr. Lenz is angry, but do the comments of a nurse and a neighbor, whatever they were, really merit calling into question all of civilization? On a smaller scale, do they merit an attack on clothes that are "stylish and wrinkle-free"? And do they merit attacking supermodels for "being tall and impossibly fit?"

First of all there is no such thing as being impossibly fit. Mr. Lenz' adjectives are as imprecise as his argument. But why attack anyone for being fit? I don't like supermodels much, but it has nothing to do with their beauty or their fitness. It has to do with the fact that many of them are shallow and vulgar, never smile, party all the time and vacuum up drugs, and help sell loads of stuff nobody needs. But this is a problem with fashion and advertising in general, and it would be true even if models suddenly became short, ugly, and impossibly flabby. Short ugly flabby people can be shallow and vulgar, too, and I would flee them for the same reason. This is the rational reason to flee supermodels. No sensible person attacks people for being beautiful or fit. It is like attacking the sun for shining. You might as well attack children for having perfect skin or attack gorillas for being so strong or attack puppies for having such soft hair. "Aargh, those damned puppies! They are so soft and cuddly. Now no one ever wants to pet me, just because I am big and bald and mean. There must be something wrong with civilization!" I suspect that Mr. Lenz included this gratuitous attack on models to score points with the women on the jury. He did the math and touched all the right bases. Everyone knows that the supermodel is neo-feminist enemy number one, just ahead of Hugh Hefner, George Bush, and Adolph Hitler.

[To look at this issue upside down, consider another portrait in the competition, the burn victim Shayla, by Doug Auld. Mr. Auld tells us that Shayla is a cheerleader. Remind yourself that that would be the kiss of death for anyone else. Cheerleaders are like supermodels and beauty queens. If Mr. Auld had painted a non-burn victim looking all teenaged and perky, and told us she was a cheerleader, the jurors would have thrown the jpeg into the recycle bin with maximum force.]

Finally, we don't really know anything about Mr. Lenz and his relationship with his son. It is private and probably should have remained private, as far as art goes. If the boy were really the shaman his father presents him as, he might ask that he not be made into a poster child. He might be humiliated to know that he is being given extra credit, bonus points, for his syndrome. As it is all we have is a blurb. For all we know his father was screaming obscenities at him in between photographs. When judging personalities, a jury is taking everything on faith. When you judge art as art, it doesn't matter who the artist is, but when you judge art as politics, when you require all paintings to arrive with blurbs, you are



wholly dependent on the artist's story. If he is making a hero out of himself or his subject, you have nothing to go on but his word.

Second place went to my friend Yuqi Wang, who I consider to be a great painter. But his blurb still bothers the hell out of me. He ties the painting to 9-11 and I am absolutely sure that is why he got recognized by these jurors. If he had said that the painting depicted his wife and him hiding their post-coital nakedness from the Fuji blimp, he wouldn't have won a thing. Yuqi sent me a jpeg of that painting in 2005 and he never mentioned it had anything to do with 9-11. Now I have had to go look closely in photoshop, where I see the little mirror with the fire and all that. Damned disappointing, since I liked the painting better without the blurb. As it is, he might just as well have drawn a little arrow from the mirror to his head with the caption, "Place this thought here."

Yuqi is still the master of technique: he puts most other realists to shame. But honestly I like his old work better. *Black Grass* and *Year of the Dog* and *Kora* and so on are among the finest paintings of the last century, in my opinion. But his new work, with all the self-portraits and pieced-together allegories, feels claustrophobic. He needs to get out of his studio and out of his head a bit more, I think. He needs some fresh inspiration, some new things to love. I can't stand to see him join all the other victims, sharing their pain, bearing witness to one another's tragedies.

Yuqi isn't really in that club yet, of course. The political content of his painting here is pretty subtle compared to most of the other finalists. But he is inching in that direction, and I really hate to see it. Great art was never about that.

Which brings up another fine point that I can afford to hit here only in passing. When I say that great art was never about victimhood, people tend to throw Van Gogh at me as a counterexample, as the first painter of modern angst. But these people need to look again at the paintings and re-read the letters. Van Gogh was no precursor to this vein of tragedy and bearing witness, this exhibit-your-symptom art. He was painting the things he loved, because he loved them. This was true early on with his paintings of Sien, the Potato Eaters, and other peasants, and it was still true near the end with the fruit trees, the muddy boots, the chair with pipe, the sunflowers, the night sky, and his neighbors. Vincent had more than enough pain and tragedy and heartbreak to justify "painting angry" or painting as a reaction, but he never went that road. He was always looking for transcendence, for meaning. If you can't see that clearly from his paintings, go to his letters where he says it outright. He was never interested in art as therapy or complaint or activism. It was a substitute religion for him, and as such was too important to use as a political tool or as a simple signboard.

Or go back to Michelangelo, who lived through 11 Popes, the sack of Rome, the burning of Savonarola, and many personal privations and tragedies. He was even lonelier than Van Gogh, since Vincent only had to suffer through 37 years, whereas Michelangelo lived to be 87, most of it alone. Nonetheless, Michelangelo never devolved into an artist of tragedies or horrors or private complaint. Like Van Gogh, he wasn't just painting or sculpting kittens or sunsets in order to create some idealized perfect world; but he wasn't painting gratuitous violence or brutality, either. When he was painting battles early on, it wasn't to make a political statement, it was to paint nude men. And when painting the horrors of hell

later on, as in the Last Judgment, the pain was tied to universal order. It was the pain of punishment for sin. It was justice. This kind of order may not make sense to many people now, but my point is that Michelangelo was not a chronicler of horrors in the modern sense. Contemporary brutalities are thrown in our faces as proof that the world does not work, or that life does not make sense. The brutalities of Michelangelo or Bosch or Matthias Grunewald or Ribera or even Goya were presented as pieces in a mythology that ultimately justified itself. That is why Odd Nerdrum's fake mythology doesn't work: the brutality doesn't find a place in any greater schema. It is manufactured and gratuitous. And that is why all this politics and angst and pathology on display in contemporary art—and at this competition—does not mean a thing. It is existentially, morally, and aesthetically unimpressive in every way.

None of these works of art, including Yuqi's, make us feel better (or even worse) about any iniquity or inequity. There is nothing we can do about any of them, so all we end up doing is crawling deeper under the covers. The bad feeling we get from the art is just lumped on top of all the other bad feelings, and we are basically kicked a step closer to depression. Classical tragedy understood the necessity of catharsis, of some release, either from resolution or by creating the idea that some specific response was possible. But modern art forbids any release, since that would be too easy. That would be inauthentic. And no response can be suggested, since that would be fascist.

In this way, modern art is actually *not* progressive. Progress requires a path, and modernism provides no path. All paths have been purposely dug up, as limiters of freedom. The famous artists of the 20<sup>th</sup> century were destroyers and deconstructors. They didn't believe in progress of any kind, not for the left or right. The whole idea of progress was "proved" to be a naïve child's toy, which is why it is difficult for me to understand why the left has embraced modernism. Even our winner here, Mr. Lenz, is telling us that the world is not perfectable. He implies that what we should seek is acceptance (which used to be called resignation), not solutions. How, exactly, can that idea be tied to progressive politics? How can people who do not believe in progress claim to be activists? Activism limited to acceptance and tolerance is not terribly active. It might be called "inactivism", since it would tend to encourage stasis. We become more resigned to the dandelions and wrinkles and birth defects. Stasis is synonymous with conservatism, so that it is a mystery to me why the left considers itself progressive. Progress is achieved by people who do not accept the way things are and do not tolerate the major glitches in the system. Their reaction is to fix those glitches. That is what true liberalism and progressive politics implies and must imply.

That was not the quickest fine point I have ever made, but there it is. Now on to the third place winner, Nuno de Campos. I knew when I saw the list of jurors that this was the kind of thing we would get, but it still made my blood boil when I saw it. This painting was chosen entirely on the blurb, which states, "My paintings acknowledge the impossibility of ever fully defining a person in an image." Yes, that is doubly true when you don't paint the head of the person, and triply true when you can't paint any other part of the body without making it look like plastic. Mr. de Campos also talks a lot about *Guernica* and Picasso and Iraq and Colin Powell and so on, but I am not even going to comment on that since none of it comes together into an attackable idea. It is just a lot of capitalized words thrown in a pot and presented to the judges. The artist must have grabbed the *New York Times* and started clipping names.

Given more space I am sure he could have worked in supermodels and 9-11 and Al Qaeda and the holocaust.

Mr. de Campos is the prize winner that shows how utterly hostile the jurors really are towards portraiture and realism. It was as close to a white canvas as they could get without waking Ms. Outwin Boochever from the grave. This is the big middle finger, the grand taking a piss, the giant flabby moon directed at realism and portraiture. If you hired the Ku Klux Klan to judge the NAACP awards, this is the kind of thing you would get. The Klan would be very amused in that situation, I am sure, and the administrators here are on a par with the Klan in that regard. They are entrusted by their sponsor and by the government and by the American people to organize a portrait competition, they create a website that claims they are taking all this seriously, they take money from thousands of people, and then they choose portraits that aren't portraits. Two of the other finalists, Jenny Morgan and Jenny Kanzler, are in the same category, since neither painting has a human head in it. I think there are grounds for a class-action lawsuit here, since the \$25 entry fee was taken under false pretenses, with false advertising, and with malice. Unfortunately I can't file that lawsuit myself, but if you entered I encourage you to do so.

I will also point out that sculptors were lied to here. Of 51 finalists, only two were sculptors, and the two chosen were clearly chosen just to take a piss. If these jurors didn't want any sculpture, they should have just said so. I suppose they will ask for pastels in 2009 and show only watercolors, or something equally amusing and poignant.

The levels of transparent toadyism were also astonishing in this competition. Sam Messer entered a portrait of the photographer William Eggleston, which allowed him to drop a ton of names in his blurb as well as to cite two books he has published. He should really stick to writing books and kissing up to famous people, since he can't draw or paint to save his life. Paul Oxborough, Brenda Zlamany, and Kathleen Gilje are much better painters, but they too are here mainly to shine shoes and lick boots. It is clear that they read the prospectus closely beforehand (see the list I quoted above). Mr. Oxborough chose Chuck Close from the list and Ms. Zlamany chose Alex Katz. But Ms. Gilje won the limbo contest, since she is completely prostrate before Robert Rosenblum (who happens to be the curator at the Guggenheim). We find from her blurb that she had the brilliant idea to create a whole exhibition of critics and curators, so she wins the brown-nose award hands down. The only way she can be surpassed in 2009 is if someone paints himself with his head literally up Lucien Freud's bazoo.

I would like to thank Richard Weaver, Marita Dingus, William Lawrance, and Robert Bauer for refusing to provide a blurb. That was refreshing. I actually liked Mr. Weaver's painting, which was subtle, honest, with a strong mood. It was also very well-painted, without any gratuitous tricks or clever sidelights. I would like to see it again when it is not surrounded by so much spiritual noise. As it was it was difficult to concentrate, like trying to read love sonnets while being strafed with machine-gun fire.

I will also mention two portraits that did not vex me in any way. Armando Dominguez and Laura Karetsky both acted like true artists with their entries, although Ms. Karetsky should have gone the way of the others and ditched the blurb. It was not offensive, it was just pointless. Mr. Dominguez' blurb also added nothing to his work, but it was straightforward and sincere and did no harm.

Now for the conclusion. Not just a wrap-up, but a resolution. An old-fashioned suggestion for a solution, a pathway of progress. For I really am a progressive. I am also an activist. I am not an activist at the easel, but remember my bio: I have been active on many issues, and art is now my main issue. Unfortunately, as the script has unfolded, it has turned out to be my activism against everyone else's, since they have stolen my sacred cow and are using her as a signboard. They also require that I use her as a signboard, or I won't be in the club. Well so be it.

I don't believe in resignation or acceptance; I believe in doing better. I also believe in fighting back, and I only count the heads of my enemies with the point of my spear. I don't have an agenda, I have a mission. I am a berzerker. Like Van Gogh, I say, "What is it to me whether my chance is slight or great? . . . One loves because one loves." My mission concerns demanding autonomy for artists. We cannot produce good work when we have non-artists and artist-poseurs making rules for us, telling us we must be relevant or must be political or must make people think or must do this or that to impress them. I can decide what subject to paint and how to paint it without any help from critics and curators, and so can you. If politics or history or religion or narrative informs art in a normal artistic way, fine, but it should not be a requirement. In fact, we should be very wary of all these categories, since, as the 20<sup>th</sup> century has shown, they tend to corrupt art. They tend to take over, like weeds in a garden, choking everything else out.

Furthermore, artists are fully capable of defining art without the help of outsiders. We did it for ten thousand years, and art was always healthier when the artist tended his own field.

Van Gogh knew this, too. Early in his letters to Theo, he quoted Zola's *le triomphe de la mediocrite*, and added that we have "Snobs, nobodies come in the place of workers, thinkers, artists, and it isn't even noticed." That is what this review has been about: I have noticed. I have noticed, and I believe that this is the most critical information for activists to give to the world. This is the central fact that must be told in the political fight for art. Not any of this misdirection about acceptance, tolerance, tragedy, or victimhood. That is just propaganda in support of an entrenched priesthood of fakes and phonies. They wrap themselves in the flag and in every sort of shallow populism as a form of protection. "You wouldn't hit a man who uses his challenged son as a shield, would you?" The bathos is transparent beyond any imagining.

For the simple fact is that all the professed heroes of the left would never stop wretching if they saw to what depths art had sunk. Forget Van Gogh. Diego Rivera and Frida Kahlo would be violently opposed to what the avant garde has now become. They would be firing shots into the walls of the museum, screaming and punching to make themselves understood. They didn't spend a lifetime defending and creating art so that it could be coopted by critics and curators.

Look at what is happening in Mexico even as I write this. The Mexicans still have some hot blood left in them: unlike the frigid and inactive Americans they do not put up with having elections stolen. Nor would they put up with having art stolen and embalmed and turned into nihilistic weepings or scary and repulsive photorealism or obsequious homages to overlords.

So read this review as direct action, action with the mighty pen. And I encourage other artists to act. Perhaps the action suggested most strongly here is refusing to enter contests juried by critics and curators and other administrators. They are death to art, no matter whether the people involved are mainly right or left. They coopt art for their own purposes, spend all the available money on themselves and their friends, and suck everyone dry of inspiration. They tell you to resist your own impulses, which is great for them since they can then transplant their own impulses into you. Once you start down their road you are lost, for all reward is focused on those who play by their rules. And since they are not artists, their rules will be the rules of non-artists. They will be more interested in theory and politics and writing. They will ask for blurbs, since they can't really see what it is a painting without a verbal cue. They will ask for political content, since they don't understand what artistic content is. They will deconstruct art and jettison all your conventions, since they don't know what they are for. They will break all your toys with a chuckle, since they didn't buy them, can't work them, and can't comprehend them. And if you fail to see the humor in having all your talents sat upon and all your achievements smashed or ignored, they will dust off their debating tricks and blame you for being self-centered—as if the nerd should smile and thank the bully for bullying him.

Besides not giving these people any opportunity to gain power through you, you can also respond. You can write letters. Go over their heads. The National Gallery is a public institution funded in large part by tax dollars. Write to the director and tell him or her that this show was grossly mismanaged, financially and artistically. And go even higher. Write to Congress and tell them the same thing.

I am also serious about a lawsuit. Even if you don't get anywhere with it legally you might still get publicity by filing it. You don't have to win, you just have to get it into the papers.

You could also write to the descendants of Ms. Outwin Boochever. It may be that one of them can see that the show is contemptuous of her wishes. They may revoke the sponsorship or sue to have the sponsorship discontinued, based on failure to abide by the charter.

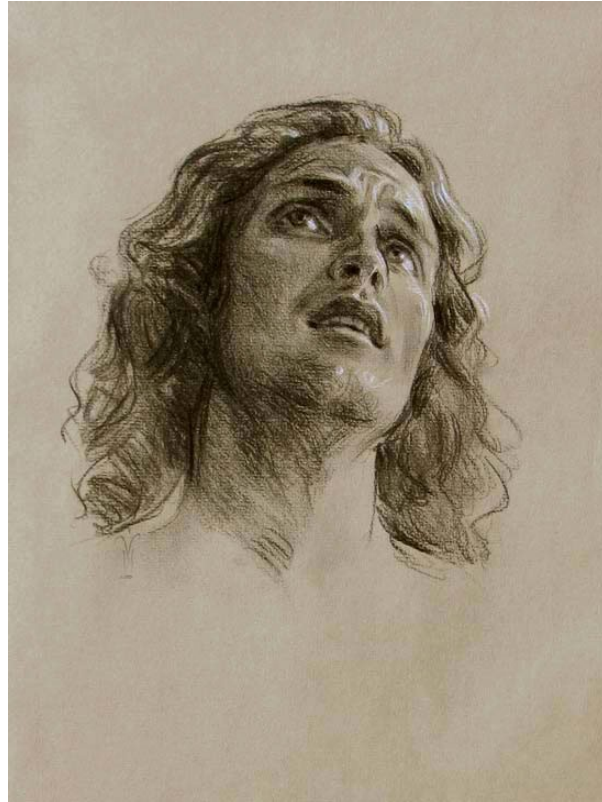
Point out to all concerned that it will only get worse. If these jurors think they have gotten away with this, then in 2009 we will have “portraits” of potatoes and dead people and roadkill and stick figures and cartoon characters and Barbie dolls and toilet seats. You know I am right. Perhaps the only reason we didn't get that this time is that Ms. Outwin Boochever was still alive as late as Christmas, 2005.

But perhaps the most important thing you can do is paint and sculpt great portraits and figures, no matter what the clueless everywhere demand. Don't ever accept that beauty is over, or greatness, or epic pieces, or subtlety, or talent, or depth. This portrait competition tried to convince its audience that “everyone is an artist”. But that is another lie. Many will find some solace or meaning in creation, but, like any other action, only some will be capable of high achievement. Hierarchies will be created and they must be respected, lest the field become degenerate. This is not a regressive belief or a return to aristocracy; it is a fact of life and of every field of endeavor. Opportunity must be equal; achievement cannot be.

The only way to discover the full extent of your capabilities is to air them out. But you cannot do this if you are being sat on. If you have accepted that greatness or talent or high achievement is a myth or a

social construct or an aggressive act or an unfair advantage, then you are being sat on. If you have accepted that there is something wrong with health or beauty or depth or subtlety or skill, then you are being sat on. If you accept that there is something wrong with being tall, you will never raise your eyes to the sky or lift your arms over your head in elation. If you accept that there is something wrong with being fit, you will never run 'til your lungs burn and your spirit flies. If you accept that "all that is over", as the critics have told us about great painting, then all that is over. If you don't, then it is not.

# NOTES of an ARTIST *(to himself)*



*by Miles Mathis*

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## Preface

As the discoverer of this volume, and therefore, by default, its editor, I have little to say in the way of an introduction. I have been pressed by the publisher to comment on its author, and its mode of transmission to me, in the briefest possible terms. This is all to the good, since my knowledge of Mr. Mathis begins and ends with the "autobiography" (for lack of a better word) that follows, and since its transmission to me is explained in one sentence. I found it in the house I had just bought, and which I had assumed was empty of my predecessor's perquisites. Actually the house was littered with the most personal objects imaginable, not just papers and drawings, but all manner of what some might call "interesting" finds, quite a few of them unmentionable. I was in the way of burning everything I could sweep into a pile when Amelia, my wife, arrived and immediately stopped my housecleaning. It was



her opinion that, with some people's perverse interest in art, we might have something worth publishing. Unfortunately, the fire had already consumed all the drawings and paintings, so we will never see their value at auction. The illustrations in the book survived with it, and they may give you an idea of the author's taste. All I am allowed to say is that I am not an artist, but his tastes are not mine.

Amelia and I divided the typing of the work between us, deciphering Mr. Mathis' handwriting and blots of inks as we could and correcting spellings and filling in the most obvious word omissions or doubles as we went. We did not edit for content, or for readability (obviously). I can't honestly say that we read everything for meaning, since, in my opinion, that would have been futile. I am told that the publisher has gone back and reinstated the British spellings, as a nod to authenticity, but even the author's usage is inconsistent, and the whole issue is a hash. Amelia believes that the work should be read as a diary, not as a novel, making such matters irrelevant. For me this changes nothing, but that is all I will add.

The questions I have gotten from those who have read at least the first few pages concern not the narrative, but the illustrations. Where are all these works? The author claims that none are extant. Is this true? If true, where did he get these reproductions? Are these the only extant reproductions? I have no information to share on this, and I'm not sure anyone does. I destroyed a number of works, but not the work of a lifetime. Even the author admits this. He recounts how many were lost, and dismisses the rest early on. I am almost certain that none of these works were among the ashes I swept out. I think it is best to accept that we are dealing with a figure of slight historical importance, and to leave it at that. Many people have lived who we know absolutely nothing about. It should not be surprising that some were artists, or that some have died only recently. Certainly my several calls to England have been unfruitful, and the corroboration of other claims of the author will have to be left to those with more interest in the subject.

I will close with the theory that much of this autobiography, or *diary* if you will, is a creative fiction. Whether these works ever existed in the context the author claims is unprovable, in the same sense that the rest of the story is. All we know is that a very old man lived in my house on Canyon Road, that he died there, and that he wrote, or at least signed, this book. The rest is speculation. The whole adventure, from meetings with famous artists, and remembered dialogue, to the poems (his own and those of others), to the paintings and drawings, are none of them backed up with any scientific evidence. Just as an example, what is one to make of a poem from a *ghost*? I am sorely afraid that, despite everyone's wishes to the contrary, this work must stand or fall on its own. *My* best wishes to the author, for his good fortune is mine.

Eugene Lockley, *PhD* (September, 1940)



#### Publisher's Note

It will be noticed that 58 years have passed between the composition of the Preface and the publication. The events of 1941 precluded release by the original publisher, which company is now defunct. The Lockley family lost interest in the project until recently, when it was exhumed by George Channing Lockley, Vice Provost for Womens Studies at New Mexico State University, Portales, and grandson of Eugene Lockley, PhD (1903-1971). Mr. Lockley has requested that his grandfather's prefatory remarks

stand in lieu of his own.

Contrary to the desires of these "editors," we have treated this document as an historical one, whose value is yet to be proven or disproven. Obtaining the temporary possession of the original manuscript, we have printed all of the author's words as he wrote them. This has always been our policy, as is stated below our colophon. Likewise, as another part of the historical record, and by the same policy, we have printed the editor's remarks unedited for content; that is, unexpurgated. Mr. Lockley, as the owner of this manuscript (by that age old law of finders-keepers), is entitled to his opinion as to its value and authenticity. And you, as the reader, are entitled to know that opinion.



### Chapter the First

Death is an otter  
swimming rings around the moon  
riverdaughter writing runes around the sun

Life is a fish  
gills wide in flight from webby paws  
scaled son-of-stars, stippled child of middlenight

Death is a bear  
dancing a buzzing whirlpool fur-fearless  
and honeycomb drunk

Life is a bee  
pollen-dusted in sexy flower hop  
unaware of ursa dipping overhead

Should the apocalypse arrive tomorrow, crashing down like waves of glass, galloping down a black and sea-torn wind, Satan clawing up from under us with his mass of horses, bridling and stamping for our souls, there are a few things I would like to have done with. To have finished that is, so that they stand in time regardless. One of these things is already done. One of these things is my paintings. Another is this letter, this letter posted to my bones, that I must surely scribble more quickly if my hand, with the world, is in fact shrivelling tomorrow. This letter I am writing, from my head to my hand and back again (a tight, feckless circle I am willing to admit), *must* be finished if I am to sleep in peace as the Demons go roaring overhead. It tells my story. And in telling it closes it.

You must understand this, diggers beyond the blast, unearthing looming pages for your re-education: I am not who you were told I was. I am not that larger-than-life toppling monolith of a statue-man. Nor am I no one. I am who I say I was, and if you don't think so, you are wrong.

Who I am at this point, before the beginning, before I start telling you this story, is an old man, writing at an old desk, with a goddamned old pen that I would like to stomp on and give to the goddamned devil, except that it's the only one I have. I now understand why the sages have retired to the tops of their pillars, silently muttering curses; or measured deserts by the length of their bodies, like mad caterpillars; or whirled like frenzied dervishes, as in some manic attempt to dislodge earmites: the reason, of course~spluttery nibs. The holy man goes into the wilderness in search of a typist.

The year is 1939, you see, and I am in Santa Fe, New Mexico, where proper nibs are very hard to find. Goosefeathers everywhere, so to speak, but nary a usable nib. Also, I am angry whenever I have to write paragraphs like these two instead of that first one. Straight narrative bores me to bloody hell, but I have been assured by all concerned (I'm fibbing here~*I'm* the only one concerned) that I have to offer the reader at least the smallest and most widely and haphazardly placed steppingstones through this bog of my remembrance. That is, I must find a way to use a number of pedestrian writing devices, which even the most Zennish and progressive reader requires, such as times, places, people, dialogue. A certain Ladyfriend, who I am proud to say is not quite as old as I am~who is still partially mobile, that is~assures me that, at least at the beginning, I need to provide the groundwork of a shore before I fling (to speak jauntily) my *fidus Achates*, my faithful reader, into the ocean's maw. This I am attempting, with almost no success (I am told from the bed). This Ladyfriend is mouthing, with the largest possible fishmouth, the word "description" at me from under a blanket of cats and pillows, but is not happy that I am describing *her*, even if in the tersest and least incriminating of ways. She suggests I invent some succulent adjectives for my bald head and blue-green legs, but I think I'll pass. All you need to know about me, physically, at this point in my maturity, is that I retain the hands that Degas himself once called *elegantes*, and that I sleep unright, like a horse, with my coat coppertacked to oversize stretcher bars.

But enough of that. I know you clever people, who study fossils and other muddy things, find it amusing that I will not be young or normal or happy or whatever it is that all of our grandchildren and

their hopping offspring are becoming after the Millenium (or just around the corner, leave it to me not to know). But in the back of my tottering brain, where the future exists for me, where possibilities beyond my brain are created by my brain for my brain's pathetic amusement, there is a boy, or maybe a girl. A little artist who has survived all the genetic upheavals and the masses of black and scary horses, chomping and chomping. An anachronistic egg hatched by the warmth of an unloved Sun. A solitary sea turtle flapping in an eddyleless ocean. To this little dot of green, making his way, making his way, I say *flap*, my friend, as the laughing gull flaps above you, as the coelecanth still sucks below you. Make your way and I will see you somewhere, maybe, there where van Gogh, like a pale-blue peasant, coughs up his absinthe and toothes his pipe, where Cellini pulls down the very angels to crack a head, where Michelangelo sleeps on stone, a fine white dust clinging to his eyebrows like pollen on an oblivious bee.

And one more thing. You non-turtles, you slippery spirits of the aftermath who study letters like mine for profit, analyzing and interpreting for the amusement of your pathetic brains (brains which cannot paint to save their lives): To you I say this, and I am right. *Leave us be. Let alone this message. It is not for you.*

Dear Little Turtle, *I am you*. I am neither the hand writing nor the eye reading. The hand reflects. The page reflects. The eye reflects. *And I am back to you.*

What will I tell you in this story of yours? Whose voice will you hear in your head? Read fast or you may hear yourself telling me this story of mine.

When you were born you were very small and somewhat younger than you became. You were senses~movement, sounds, pains, pleasures. Everything you saw was you. Everything you felt was you. It was yours.

*Do you know better now?*

Once you reached for the breast. You saw it: you touched it, you tasted it. Once you reached for the moon. You saw it: you could not touch it, you could not taste it. And you understood. Near. Far. Big. Little. Dark. Light. Me. You.

But you were not wrong before. The breast is still as the moon, yours and unreachable.

What must you forget to remember what you have never known?

I am you. Tell me.

When you were born you were very large and older than you would ever be again. Nothing was not you. Since then you have whittled you down to yourself.

*When will you tire of whittling?*

An old man is a master carver, his life a pile of shavings. Sweep them into a pile and burn them to keep the young warm.

*The old man is dead.*

You have in your head, Lord knows why, what Leonardo said: "I thought I was learning to live. I was only learning to die."

*Do you know better now?*

Nosferatu drank blood. No master carver he. But blood is no more nourishing than breastmilk. Or moonbeams. Or board nails. Fire consumes wood. The tree consumes the sun.

*Are you tree or wood?*

As a baby, you brought everything to your mouth. You were the world and the world became you as you consumed it. The moon *and* the breast. The tree *and* the sun. Before you knew the difference, all

were equally nourishing. Do you know better now?

*Let me tell you. I am you.*

As a child you slept eighteen hours a day, nourished by dreams, nourished by the you that is now not you. Awake, your work was play. Not whittling, but building. Now, no longer a child, you die by degrees. You burn your wood. The sun burns you. All is whittling. You master carver, asleep on a bed of shavings. But you do not swallow moonbeams whole, or blood or breastmilk either.

*You have told me this, so I know.*

In sculpting clay the sculptor adds on until a whole is reached. In sculpting stone the sculptor chips away until a remainder is reached. Are you stone or clay?

*Tell me as I sculpt you.*

What were you at eight? Do you remember? Has it been chipped away or does your clay still contain it?

*This you must know.*

Some there are who feel that every breath is owed to the air, and who exhale only from a sense of guilt. Those who cannot justify the length of their arms or the width of their beds. Those who are abashed to find their own footprints behind them in the sand.

In ballet it is the dancer's duty to fill as much space as possible, to devour the air and to blanket the four dimensions.

*This is called beauty.*

In painting it is the artist's duty to consume the world, to demolish it and rebuild it with in the blink of an eye, to surround it as with a net, or the grip of a vast hand, and to squeeze from it its essence.

*This is called beauty.*

Dear Little Green Dot, flapping a frothy sea, This is our latest story: my life. Or, if you like, the events ~such as *I* remember them~ from 1858 to now (interspersed, nay, crammed, with an extravaganza of extraneous and only obliquely related diversions). Those who like a straight line, pointing neatly and quickly to the last page of the book are invited to read the last page of *another* book. *This* one hits some narrative~I can't say for how long~precisely here:

*I was born a speckled egg and blue.*

In hot bath and cold bath Mummy would scrub me white and shiny~would have scrubbed all my corners oval if she could, I think~but as soon as I was towelled and replaced under the chickens to sleep till dawn I would dream a spotty dream, holding myself by the heels over a cerulean Styx and counting the river monsters. Closing my eyes and holding my breath, I would dive for dragons' teeth and smooth black stones, my speckles being bites from those stygian beasties where the blue would not dye. These were the pores of my vulnerability, my St. Sebastian's arrowholes. I kept them plastered with rabbitskin glue and champagne chalk. Mummy and Poppy did not know these things.

To get just a morsel *more* prosaic, and for those who find such information indispensable: I also had a red birthmark on my left knee, which soon went away. No doubt this was some omen of great urgency, which I have never been able to unravel. I leave it to the art critics of the future, who, if they are incredibly creative (and what art critic isn't), may be able to spin a Master's thesis or two out of such rich biographical material. Personally, I would tie that red knee into the poesy dream in the preceding paragraph, if I could find any way to do it without getting mawkish. But I can't. What else? Eggshell blue eyes and wavy blond hair (that went spirally at fourteen; and grey at 45; and mostly gone at 60). But never chubby, never cherubic (that was my little brother). Not a lap child: marginally pinchable, if at all. I have been told there is something devilish about my eyes~or my gaze, at any rate. I know who I am~I have never really scared *myself*~but no one listens to such things. A man is no longer taken at his own estimation. I may be guilty, I don't know, of a faraway look, or an unnatural seriousness, or

perhaps even a good dose of standoffishness. None of that Stephen Daedalus blather, mind: I was no playground wimp~no muling, sickly, watcher-from-the-wings (remember that Leonardo, invert that he was, nevertheless could bend iron bars with his bare hands; that Cellini and Caravaggio fought anyone who said a crooked word to them--Cellini called himself *'Il primo uomo del mondo'*: the best man in the world'; and that Raphael was the most glittering jewel of the Court, sleeping with every Florentine woman between the ages of 15 and 25. Only the modern artist is a milquetoast). If I were being completely honest here, and I know that is beyond the realm of hope, and probably of necessity, I would describe myself, even in the crib, as an old man just waiting to get grouchy. Only my closest acquaintances can tell you what a bullseye that is. But it is also misleading, given away as a tidbit this early. For I was by no means a teary child, or a screamer. Mummy wrote quite proudly in my babybook that my 'terrible twos' lasted only a week (apparently I was very impressed by the beatings). I don't know how interesting any of this is to perfect strangers, but I do feel I have to flesh out my early life a bit, just to keep this whole enterprise from going completely topheavy.

*Here I remind myself, before I lose all confidence, that my reader is but a tiny green turtle, with the patience of all long swimmers, and who will beak up even seaweed if times are hard.*

So, as I was beginning to imply, I was rather a melancholy tot, comparatively. Not terribly social. Although friendly enough when pressed. I keep going back to my babybook for verification, (which is the only piece of corroboration I have from that period) because of course *I* want to believe that I was the perfect child, serenely well-adjusted from the zygote, only with the ill fortune to be birthed into a poorly adjusted world. Mummy is good enough to supply me with this quote, on page 18 (one year, eight months): 'Child quite (sic) as a mause (sic). Cheery, long as he has his thum (sic).' I don't think I need add much to that, except perhaps the fact that my 'thum' later saved me much trouble with tobacco.

I might say here that this babybook I have already mentioned twice was posted to me from my little brother Fritz some years ago when Poppy died. Fritz, as the son that stayed on, of course got everything else, and a precious little everything it was, but he thought I might know what to do with this babybook (short of burning it, he said). It arrived, in San Geminiano I believe, just before the war, complete with a number of my earliest drawings interleaved throughout, on the yellowest and most sawtoothed of pages. For some reason there were also included, as bookmarks, a number of old twigs and larch leaves that I could make nothing of. When this parcel was delivered to me I was working on an outdoor mural for an Italian cakemaker named Potino or Pitono, I can't remember and don't care, and the mural began to disintegrate almost before I got to the train station, so I had other worries. I later heard, through a tortuous and transcontinental grapevine, that all my lovely fresco heads lasted until the next heavy rain, but no longer. Whether that is true or not, I can't say; but I didn't look at the baby book again for almost thirty years, until I got here and set up this tortilla stand/studio, and began thinking about writing this, this, this whatever this is.

The first tangible piece of evidence I have that my life has not been a complete fiction, the hallucination of some drowsy orangutan or precocious porpoise, is this scrap I offer you dated 1860. It is only one of many similar figures scrawled across a page. This, I take it, is my first portrait:

[illustration here]

I do not remember who this might be a portrait *of*, although I suppose it is a self-portrait, my little

brother being some three years younger and Poppy not having any hair at all. Also, his legs were longer. I found this little doodle~which is hardly prophetic of any future talent, despite the oracular ears~next to page 26, which shared this complaint of Mummy: 'cant keep him from marking the walls.' Her words are proved on the same page, which is covered with pen marks that look, to the untrained eye, like french fries floating from margin to margin. In my mother's tiniest printing, at the bottommost edge, is this: 'him again.'

I almost forgot. The title of my baby book is *Baby Milestones*. This title caused me some trouble when I was a hobbledehoy. I still consider it, to this day, a perplexing co-incidence, but one I have never had the proper fortitude to pursue. At three, the question that became foremost in my mind, understandably, was why my brother's book was not entitled *Baby Fritztone*s. I leave it to the historians and art therapists, whose thesis cups are beginning to runneth over.

So I need not exaggerate, I am sure: I was no Mozart or Thomas Lawrence. I did not perform for Princes or Popes. I was only speckled. Speckled-and-blue. Not that everyone could *see* that I was, mind. Auntie Joan, more optimistic than accurate, liked to say that I was 'sunnyside up.' Uncle Nigel never failed to retort, my oddities being evident from an early age, 'Contrariwise, the boy is scrambled.' Until I learned, like Pavlov's dog, to flee at the beginning of these pronouncements, I suffered Uncle's inevitable follow-up to this witticism, which was, of course, a make-believe egg being cracked on my downy pate, fingers running down like yolk.

Be that as it may, my natural propensities did begin to assert themselves, and to demand recognition, even as I looked on blamelessly, unaware of my own fate. My speckles, which were both my arrowholes and my bowstrings, would not fade or be blended. I will show you another one of these speckles, hiking my trousers and rolling my sock like a schoolchild exhibiting a precious scab (another 'baby milestone'):

[illustration here]

Mummy: *But, Miley Pie, whyever is the caboose so so small?*

Me (age three years, three months): *'Cause, Mummy, 'tis further 'way, course.*

This dialogue is imaginary. I needed it, so I made it up. But some conversation much like it, if not so lollypoppy, did take place (Mummy's pet name for me is no creation of *mine*, and I still have it sewn into all my frocks and pantaloons). One of my earliest memories is the family myth that built around the drawing of that train. I think the shock of it forever dazzled Mummy, and she could never look at me after that without confusion, as if trying to figure just how we were related, what incubus had known her. For if you think my parents were shocked that I had some innate understanding of perspective at age three, you see only half the story. They were shocked to discover that there *was* such a thing as perspective. They had never noticed it, and didn't want to admit it when they did. I honestly think Poppy considered it a sort of black magic, that two train carriages, which everyone knew to be identical, could look larger or smaller, according to position. I could see him look at the ground, to avoid considering the implications. He swore off looking at faraway objects, especially people, though he never admitted it, because he couldn't but imagine them as Lilliputians, stuck forever in three-inch bodies. If he espied them, in this faery state, he might curse them to that world forever, and end up a Giant in a land of Tom Thumbs, inadvertantly crushing friends and family under his Brobdingnagian boots,like errant eggs.



[That was all from chapter 1. The following is an excerpt from chapter 2]

I had made it near to London, past the village of Woking, near the banks of the river Wey, and all my store of apples had long since vanished. I sat down upon a mossy rock, listening to the chitter-chatter of the tiny birds in the rushes, when I became aware that the birdlets and I had other human company. There was a faint song wafting up from nearer the river, and it was not coming from the breast of any feathered beastie, no matter how small and quick of heartbeat—for it contained words! Nearly as high-pitched as birdsong, it yet meandered in ways too beautiful even for them, and betrayed a complexity of melody beyond the reach of beak. I crept closer to the sound, slipping amongst willow fronds and tufts of stalky grass, and stepping gingerly between small patches of peaty water and cupfuls of bog. On the bank of the slow-moving Wey, about a stag's-leap in front of me, knelt an elf of a girl, maybe half my age—that is, five or six—with nothing on her white body but a pair of brown muddy clogs. Compared to the dark girl in Salisbury, she seemed near an infant: heartbreakingly small and delicate, almost pocket-sized, or duodecimo. And her hair was the lightest possible shade of tow: so light, you know, that her eyebrows were all but invisible. In a portrait, the shadow cast by her eyebrows would be darker than the eyebrows themselves, and would be the only thing you could paint, the only indication that she had them. Try it and you will see what I mean. Her skin was bluish white, especially in those areas normally covered. White to the point of transparency. The blue cast was caused by the veins underneath. Despite this, she did not look sickly or pale—not pale in an abnormal sense. She was not wasted or bony, just very small. Her clogs looked as if they had been stolen from a ragdoll, or from Benjamin Bunny. I might have used one to lure fish.

She was in the process of washing her dress in the current; and, as it was a warm day, and, more to the point, since she had no other clothing, this was her method. It mattered not, for her little corpuscle of a behind and miniscule torso were completely undifferentiated, and if not for the length of her hair and the dress she rinsed among the weeds, I could not have told her sex. Still, I wondered momentarily at her lonely choice of worksite and seeming abandonment, until I espied, not twelve steps to my left, a sleeping man, whom I took to be the child's father or guardian. He looked as if he had just fallen from a Brueghel painting, minus the codpiece. He was very poorly dressed, and needed the same dunking his daughter's dress was receiving, both his clothes and his person. But he had nevertheless such a wholesome and carefree air, and smiled as he dreamed, that I never once feared for the safety of the child, or even of myself, should I wake him. He was clearly a vagabond, but I judged him none the worse for that, being for the time a wanderer myself, and scarcely cleaner even than him.

I continued to listen to the child's song for a moment, enchanted by the carefree manner and unselfconscious wording she gave to the common tavern song she chirped—in a register surely two octaves above what it had ever benefitted from before—and by the curious lilt she gave it with an accent I judged to be Scots—although it was different from and much stronger than that I had encountered in Meg's speech. No doubt she had learned this rather bawdy rhyme from her father, and the words were not those one is accustomed to hear from a six year old. But, like a first-time opera-goer who speaks not a word of Italian, and yet is transported therefore all the more by the delicious quality and sheer virtue of the human voice, I attended only to sound and not to meaning, and the child's message might have been a holy cantata directed straight to heaven for all I knew or cared. And, in fact, it was, from her point of view and my point of view and heaven's, all other considerations being null.

As she paused between staves, I halloed in the smallest possible voice, so as not to alarm her. She peeped around, and then, without a hint of shame or awkwardness, stood up and began wringing out her dress. I suppose my visage has never been one to cause sensible beings much fear; and besides, it occurred to me later, this sprite was a world-traveler, camper with gypsies, and all-night walker. The

sight of a twelve-year-old boy was nothing to her, whoever he might be.

'I 'as to let me drress drra-ee', she began, 'or I'll be a mite col'er than I am. Yer nae a scared a gayerls, are ya?'

This was her sound, though I'm not sure I'll keep up the dialect. I never cared much for reading a lot of misspelled dialogue, no matter how realistic it seemed. Her effect was singular, though, you may be sure: such a strong accent~as I had never heard~from such a wee thing. My accent was strong, too, as you have seen, but it was completely different. And I didn't know I had one, whereas hers was almost untranslatable to my provincial brain. Even more shocking was her question about girls, which put me at a complete disadvantage. Not only did she seem to see right through boys of all ages, with her very framing of the sentence, but she seemed to have a knowledge of relationships that I would never have, and even to be somehow above that knowledge, even at six. Such has the feminine mind always seemed to me, whether at its greatest complexity, or, as with her, at its least.

Besides which, the situation at hand was so ludicrous~and I was quite unclear to what extent she saw that. Even were I unafraid of girls under normal circumstances, these were not normal circumstances. A naked female, of whatever age, dazzles the spirit of the male, even in a childish predicament like this. From the time of Uranus and Ge, from the time that Sky looked down on Earth unclouded, there have been unexplainable storms and winds; and my feet seemed to move beneath me and I swayed perceptibly. It was not fear I felt. Call it awe. It was a tiny sandwich of awe I chewed. It was not so much how she looked, for the physical differences between us were still small. But I now knew she was a girl and that made all the difference. She was no more woman than I was man, and yet the slimmest sliver of iron has its own magnetic current, and my fascination at her nakedness could not be quelled. The queerest thing of all, though, and what made some part of me laugh~some part beyond the storms and the tug and the pull~was that she was without dress, but it was I that seemed transparent to her.

Her cleft drew me to look at it. And so I did, like a child. I felt no excitement, for I was all pre-sexual body, but I am sure I beheld it with a more artistic eye, found in it more amazement, than she would have beheld me and mine, had our places been switched. She might have laughed. I was bemused, but never amused.

I explained my fascination with all such feminine things as strictly artistic for many years, my middle years of confusion and timidity. I lied even to myself. Or I would separate some interests as sexual and others as artistic. Or I would feel obliged to separate my models from my lovers, to keep my art impulse 'pure.' All nonsense, as I now see. Desire and inspiration are hopelessly and needfully muddled from the beginning, and there is no distinguishing them, or any reason to.

So I stared, intently and long. Remember, I had only seen myself and my brother up to that point. Finally informed, my ignorance abated for the time, I remembered myself and continued the conversation. What I liked most, though, is that she gave me time to look, did not tease me for looking, and never mentioned my looking. Everything was understood from the beginning.

'I'm not scared,' I answered her.

'Help me with these clogs then. You can wash this one. Don't drop it or you'll have to get in and get it. They float.' She hopped on one foot, twisting her clog off. Then handed it to me. It was wood-soled and it did float. 'This is the river Wey, you know. Deddy says always when we come here, "We be going by London and we'll stop by Woking on the way. Ha, ha! Deddy is very clever like that, you know."'

We washed the grime off, using rocks and twigs to scrape away the mud caked around the soles. Then, without further ado, she leapt in and paddled about for a bit. Suddenly she cried, 'I forgot soap,' and ran out of the water to her father. She found a cake of yellowy soap in one of their bundles, none too fresh it looked to me, and skipped back into the water. I watched all in the highest interest. I might have been there or not been there, it was the same to her. She washed her hair and splashed around in a

desultory, dreamy sort of fashion, looking close at the ripples in the water, and then 'Ah! A fish! A fish. I don't like him!' she screamed, laughing, and jumped back on the riverbank like a frog. She shook her hair out good and long, and wiped as many droplets from her skin as she could, especially from her arms and legs, to avoid the chill. Then she ran up and snuggled into one of her father's folds of clothing, on the downwind side. She might have just as easily crawled into one of his pockets, like a puppy, or a large shiny coin, so little space did she occupy in the three dimensions. At this, the great bear awoke, put a massive paw on the shivering child and, seeing me, said with an uneven grin,

'Hoi, hoi! So ye've met me little salmon, have ye? Me little waterbabby? Whenever I "swear by the salmon,"\* that's what I'm swearing by, the very thing,' he said, motioning at the little girl with his elbow. 'Looks laike we could use the same sort o' biling, you and me, a bit o'water on the limbs 'ould do us roight, eh, Laddy?' And without further discussion or introduction he got up, putting his great tattered coat over the clean child, and proceeded to bathe just as she had. A hulking, shapeless, hairy figure he was, of not so much interest to my eye, I need not say. But I watched all the same, if only out of curiosity this time. His hair was reddish blonde, rather long and scraggly. His beard was of like color, with flecks of grey, and was perhaps four inches long. His nose was long and straight. His eyes deep set but blue. Well over average height, he weighed possibly 17 or 18 stone, or more. He smelled strongly, though not of drink, and markedly less so after he had soaked for a while. But, as he did not wash his clothes, and as more than half the smell of him was in them, he ridded himself of less than half in the water.

I declined his friendly invitation to bathe not so much from shyness (I was, after all, a cottager, and therefore not above river bathing) but from the awareness that the sun was going down, and that I didn't want to get back into my clothes wet. Once he had got his trousers and shirt back on, though not buttoned, he came over and shook my hand.

\*An oath of great antiquity and solemnity used by gypsies and other wanderers, originating in the ancient Gaelic myths of Tuan mac Starn.

'Trelawney's the name. But you can call me Trelawney.' This impressed him as humor of the highest sort, and he chuckled long and low to himself, subsiding only when he could see there was no chance of me joining him. 'Over there, that little fish is called Sif. Just Sif. S-I-F-as-in-fish Sif, she is. Ane that roight, wriggles? Caught her one day on me great line and never threw her back. And never will throw her back, till she grows scales and swims away before me eyes.'

She looked up at him sheepishly, without expression, but obviously in full agreement. This was what he always said. And that is the way she always looked when he said it.

After a time I explained to Sif and Trelawney that I was on my way to London, and I said that if they were also going into the city, perhaps we could travel on together. Trelawney answered that they were stopping just outside London, about five miles from here, but that they would be happy to accompany me that far. As we walked I asked him advice about London and learned somewhat of his history, and Sif's. He carried a great pack on his shoulders, a pea-green pack in which a whole brood of Sifs might have ridden comfortably. I did later see her ride on the top of it at times, as a matter of fact, like a wee Sultan on the shoulders of a hoary pachyderm. Whenever Sif walked, though, the pack flowered with various poles and rods and nameless (for me) tools of great length that Trelawney left assembled, the easier to re-use. The tools were used in various skilled trades that Trelawney practiced throughout the Two Isles, mostly outside the biggest cities (where he felt 'like a plum in a pudding'). He knew somewhat of masonry, in which he could do the roughest repairs or the finest carving; of knife sharpening and sawblade retoothing; of woodworking of all kinds, from carpentry to simple sculpture; and he even dealt in scrimshaw and other ivory work of the most divers and wondrous kind. This last

trade he plied as both dealer and artisan, collecting salable pieces in ports from Lochiver to Bantry Bay to Yarmouth, and carving his own intricate specimens from whalebone and sharktooth and elephant tusk. A few of these last he showed me, digging into his pack and pulling out a felt-lined purse about the size of a lady's muff. Unrolled it contained the most miraculous cornucopia of figurines imaginable: horse's heads, icons, mermaids, phalluses, porpoises leaping, stags jumping, unicorn horns, and naked ladies in every possible degree of contortion. These ladies impressed me the most, not so much for their accuracy in proportion and gesture, which was minimal, but for the loving attention obviously paid by the artist to certain anatomical particulars~which particulars may be imagined, and therefore need not be listed. Trelawney assured me he did a brisk trade in these chaste ladies, hinting that perhaps his very existence depended on them, both in inspiration and in coin. I won't say that Trelawney's example suggested to me the heights to which an artist could reach, given the proper subject; but it was perhaps put into my mind that art, of whatever level, might at least pass for one of the trades.

Sif also had a collection which I was duly shown, and duly appreciated. In Trelawney's pack was another purse, heavier and unlined, which contained Sif's rocks. This was proof of the level of devotion from the father to the daughter, for this purse easily weighed more than the little girl herself. I couldn't have carried it across the road in a bet with the devil, much less circumambulated the British Isles with it. There were some lovely finds, to be sure and none to argue. A demi-geode was the star of the collection, which also included various polished river stones and a medley of sparklies~quartz, porphyry, mica, and the like. There was a chip of lapis lazuli, a natural agate marble, a disc of obsidian or jet (I could not tell), and a miscellany of serpentines, nephrites, and diorites. There were also bits of coral, a couple of very imperfect pearls, and other maritime refuse. One yellow sparkly caught my eye, seeming to be neither beryl nor topaz, and I asked Sif about it.

'That one is a cairngorm. Cairn Gorm is great mountain in Grampian, where the Avon comes bubblin' out o' the ground. The northern Avon, you know. The river is only a fountain at Cairn Gorm, a rindle you could stop with your toe. But Cairn Gorm is high and buirdly, not as high as Ben Nevis, but a'most. Cairn Gorm is the brother of Cairn Toul and Ben Macdhui. Ben Macdhui is the tallest o' them by a bit. I learned that from the man at Balmoral Castle. He said at the heart of Cairn Gorm was a great yellow rock as big as the moon, and that if you peeked into holes in Cairn Gorm at night you could see it glowin' like a fiery di'mint. He said if you crawled in the wrong cave in Cairn Gorm at night, you'd be blindit. It's that bright. There was a blind man at Braemar, and he said that's what happened to him! Right, Deddy?'

'Thars right, shiny fish. Thars what they said, a'right. Blindit. Couldn't see no more'n a cuttlefish in a kettle. No more'n a mole in a hole, Begore.' ('Begore' was, as I quickly learnt, Trelawney's pet oath, an exclamation for every occassion, like Poppy's 'Begad' or an Irishman's 'Begorrah'.)

I learned that Sif's mother had been a dancer, and that she had died in giving birth to Sif. Trelawney had buried her himself on the banks of the river Blackwater, County Cork, and had placed a dancing ivory figurine, carved by himself in her likeness, in her cold hands before throwing on the dirt. She and Trelawney had not been married, but he had known her longtimes, meeting on many travels. Trelawney had little else to say about her, and fell silent. Sif told me that since she was born in Cork she must be an Irish lassie, didn't I think so? I said I didn't know, to be sure. I asked if her mother were Irish.

'Oh, yes. She was named Becuma, and had long white hands, the prettiest that ever were. And the reason she died was that Manannan, the god of the ocean, wanted her to be his bride, and Deddy couldna' say no to Manannan. So she sailt in her curragh down the Blackwater and out into Youghal Bay and Mannanan took her to wife in the sea and they have many pretty fishgirls who are all my sisters and I will see them someday and they will teach me to swim very fast.'

I found this all quite fascinating, and said so. I think I believed it then, and I am not sure I disbelieve it now.

But I said, 'Your way of speaking, is it Scots or Irish? I thought it was Scots at first.'

'I dunno but its both and more again,' answered Trelawney, arising from his brood. 'I meself 'ave picked up so many ways o' talkin' and so many chopped words, I can't rightly say me ownself. Started out as to be Scots, as I'm Scots: Highlander until ten years old. Then Shetlan's, then Irelan', then 'Meriker, then Porch-e-geese (where I didn't know a word spoke for two years), then here again and all around here, stayin' on these islands for good. Sif's picked up a little word chice here and there, and allover, same's meself. Might be mistook for just about anyone, 'cept a Porch-e-geese goose, right goosefish?'

'How can I be a goosefish?' asked Sif, chickettin'. 'I'd have to have feathers and fins, then wouldn't I be a silly?'

'Nae, there be a fish with a long neck, loike, and flippers looks like wings, long and flappy, and a beak, like this (making a long pointed kiss beyond his mustaches and chasing Sif like a great bird). Ay!!! Ayyy!!! 'Tis a wallop in' goosefish, and I'm the wallopinest one of all, and you're me little sea wormicle for breakfast, you are, rouff, rouff!' (grabbing Sif like a firelog and pretending to bite her arms and belly).

Sif pummeled his head with her little fists~which had somewhat of the effect of pummeling a copper basin with live frogs~and Trelawney, pretending to be overwhelmed by the buffeting, released his catch. She scurried away to the grass on the edge of the lane, looked at us half-menacing, and then broke, almost as against her own will, into a slight grin. Then she yelped, 'I'm a gooseyfish~ goosey, goosey....rawwnk, rawwnk,' and circled us with her arms wide and her mouth open wide, wide. 'None can catch a gooseyfish, none can. Cause they swim fast. Look! Fast!' She passed Trelawney and swiped him with one of her 'wings.' 'You aren't fast enough to catch the goosey fish, you big walloping walrus mon, you big walloping whalehead mon!'

'Nae, I doan think I am, fishy. Me whalehead is a might ploated from swimming roun' the whole world today. I think as I might just wallie about here and spout from me blowhole.' He reached into his breastpocket and pulled out a well-worn pipe, carved into the shape of a porpoise, and made ready to smoke. As he filled it with tobacco, strong and sweet, he put a hand to his mouth (to block his words from Sif) and spoke low just to my ear: 'Start a'fishing for the Sif-fish and she'll be tugging on yer line all day. Won't hardly leave you time to scratch your own itches, she won't.'

Sif paused in her circling, seeing me addressed, and said, 'Bet you can't, anyway. None can't.' I smiled a half-smile at Trelawney, to throw Sif off-guard, and then suddenly lunged at her with a silly growl. She screamed and ran as fast as she could straight away from me, laughing. I gave a not too rigorous chase, letting her stay just out of reach, or slipping out of my grasp at the last moment. Finally I scooped her up into my arms like a great fleeing hen. She squirmed, and I held her, and we both laughed. Then, we stopped laughing. I didn't know what to do with her. She said, 'Put me down, Mister Boy.'

Trelawney said, 'Ee's name's Miles, Sif.'

'I know,' she answered. 'But it's a silly name and I don't like it. It reminds me of a signpost.'

'Ee didn't name eemself, fishlet. Let 'em be.'

'That I won't. I'm not hurting his feelings. Little people can't hurt bigger people. I'll call you Elfie,' she addressed to me, with complete finality and all the proper etiquette she could muster. 'Cause you look like an Elf, all curly and pointed so.'

I thought 'curly' must apply to my hair (which was wavy but not yet curly, I think) and 'pointed' to my chin or nose. It wasn't to my ears. They have always been small and round and close to my head. So I took it all as a compliment. Impertinent, like Meg's impertinence, but still meaning no harm. And I have always appreciated a bit of cheek.

That settled, Trelawney proceeded to give me a wink and a nod as to the ways of the Great City on the Thames.

'There be a kinder blighty area eastsides by the name of Little Saffron Hill. It's poor, but there's some good folks living there, same as anywheres. They's more like to take kinder on a half-growed feller as you is: which I can't promise for they gents westsides. Bloatin' around Picadilly or Chelsea'll get you nowhere but throwed in the workus or took for a thief and shipped to Australer. No matter what Mr. Dickings says, ant no Orphant made a Gentlemint everydays. Stay yerself east o' Sint Pauls and you'll have a chance of getting some bread from a mother whose wee heart'll beat for yer little angel's eyes for a day or three, til ye can get some work carrying something or scrubbing something else. Ant gonna be easy, Laddy. Ye'd best a stayed in the fields, where food can be got or stole more easy, specially from them as you knowed. Be chary of the police, who's behind ever lamppost, and the thimblerriggers, who'll rob ye of yer wristbones and yer eyeteeth. Most important, Elfie (he said with a wink at Sif, who was now listening to his warnings to me), stay away from the lads of yer own age what's not got nae jobs. Them lads'll get ye in a kettle ye canna get the lid off.

'Last time I took meself through London, that great den o' vipers~which I dunna do no more without verra dire need~there was a kind lady lived in Little Safron Hill, as I was tellin' ye 'bout. Look for The City Arms pub, under a great sign says Charrington's ales and stouts. If ye can't read, look for the letter C, like this (making a sign like that letter), like a great O with a bite took out on it, perched up high on a sign, and writ there bigger'n a man and black as the dewil's eye. Next door, or next door to that, I canna remember exactly, is a widder, poor but not too poor to give a good working lad a bit a porridge or a loaf if he's well-seemin'. If she's there yet, tell 'er it were Trelawney as sent ya. And Sif, too: she knowsa Sif. Sif doan know o' her, but she's seen the little bundle, when all Sif was is a bundle I kept next to me tobacker.'

I thanked Trelawney for all his help~although I had forgotten most of it five minutes later~and shook his great hand (in which mine was lost) once more. Sif's hand I also shook, for she would have it so.

Trelawney added, at parting, 'Keep to the narrow, Laddy, and look for us on the road, if ye have a mind to travel more. I wouldna' be sherprised if ye did, Begore. I wouldna' be tall sherprised.'

Sif only said, 'Bye, Elfie.'

'Bye, Sif.'

[painting of Sif here]

This is Sif at six, as I drew her from memory some years later. My drawings and paintings of her from life (as you will see later) look more like her. But somehow this one has always felt most like her, if you know what I mean.

I was reading this incident aloud to my editor-in-the-bed, rapturously caught up in my storytelling skills, when I suddenly received a pillow to the head. I ducked instinctively, half expecting it to be followed by a flying cat. The Aged Odalisque is of the violent opinion that my wordings are prosecutable, and that I will get us all thrown into prison. She takes especial opposition to Sif's 'cleft', or more precisely my cheek at calling it such, or even mentioning it. But, Dearest Lady Reclining, how am I supposed to have painted innumerable putti~the seraphim and cherubim~without having noticed the nude body? Is it possible to paint whilst looking the other way? And does God above, who created these naked children, not know all of their parts, by whatever name, not only their faces and arms? As

Michelangelo said, 'Let me not be displeased by what is not displeasing to God.'

But the hysteria does not subside. I am told that none but myself painted 'clefts' on his female putti, others preferring fortuitously or miraculously placed ribands or leafage; and that if my murals were always washed away or defaced, or crumbled of their own volition, it was divine judgment, judgment I surely deserved.

Ah. Will the world never grow a day older?

[The following is from chapter 3]

But I'm getting ahead of my story again. At this point I should still be twelve, alighting from the piano and wishing Gerber luck at Cremorne Gardens, where he hoped to pass the hat and enlighten the masses. As the donkeys clopped slowly away, I stepped up to pull the bell, carrying my little clothes with me in a bundle. I looked up at the whitish walls dully reflecting the slow moving Thames. Then I looked out behind me as I waited, over Battersea Reach and toward Old Battersea House, barely visible in the fog. I sniffed the air, as one does on moist days, and caught a strange scent falling down over me, coming from above. 'Bobadee! [my own oath when I was that age, don't laugh],' I said to myself aloud, for I seemed to recognize that scent, as from a recurring dream. It was the smell of turpentine! I had never before smelled it, but I was immediately drawn to it, as one is drawn to ones past and to ones future. I don't know enough about life or death, even at my age now, to give a firm opinion on reincarnation; but I swear to you that there was a sort of recognition in that smell. It somehow confirmed to me, as much as anything before or since, that I was on my path, and that my map had led me straight so far. Nothing that day that was new seemed new; nothing that others might have found strange was strange to me. Linseed oil, too, smelled to me like my own pillow, so familiar it was. A man, married for ten years, who goes to war and returns, smells his wife's hair and knows he is home. These smells were that to me, though I can never explain it.

As I stood there on the threshold, agog in the telling of my own subconscious fortune, a youngish man opened the door and asked my business. I still was dressed as Mrs. Curlew had dressed me~that is, not too poorly~so the man was not impolite. I had no card to show him, so I explained as well as I could Mr. Whistler's request that I sit for him. He seemed to find nothing at all out of the ordinary in my story and invited me inside. We walked directly up to Whistler's studio and the man pulled me through the open door and presented me like a letter from the post. Whistler was standing at an easel looking out a window over the river below. There was a painting in progress, but he seemed not to be at work. Presently he turned and looked at me.

'Walter, what is this? Where's Mother? I thought we were going to have tea.'

'Mr. Whistler, Sir, this is a model what you met and asked to come see you. He says you asked for him to sit and all.'

'Really, Walter. He has the cheek to say that, does he? Do you believe him? Would I ask him to come here looking like that? Do you think he looks paintable at all? Do you now? Say honestly!'

'I dunno as I can say. He looks well enough to me.'

'Well enough, eh? Not garish at all? Not a little overworked? Not like one of Burne-Jones pretty little angels? Not like some awful Botticelli? Hah, hah!' Here his fingers went into action, flippiting around like a handful of brushes. Dab, dab, dab they went, pretending to paint my cheeks, now nearly touching my hair. 'Not like Goldilocks, what do you say, yellow, yellow, yellow? Like a little canary?'



White collar? Blue frock? Black stockings? Who could paint it? No, Walter, I leave him to your brushes. I haven't enough colors, I'm afraid.' Walter looked a bit put out, not so much on my account as on his own. But I had an idea.

'Sir, I brought me old clothes from Evershot like you said. Remember you said that you had a parrot that you fed to a man-*goose* and that the ladies should dress in mud and straw and that you would paint me if I came to this address what you wrote on that card.'

Whistler and Walter (it was Walter Greaves I later found out) exchanged glances and then burst into laughter.

'I said ladies should dress in mud and straw, did I? I do have some rather good ideas sometimes don't I, Walter? I really should do a large canvas of Lady What's-her-title in mud and straw to show at the Academy. About 90 inches should do it, don't you think? A 'Harmony in Brown and Gold,' I'll call it. Yes, fetching, quite fetching. A capital idea. Five hundred guineas. Lady Mud-n-Straw. And her husband Lord Loincloth. Brilliant! Hah, hah! Ah. But now, what about our little model here? Can we make something of him or not, Walter? Can he be dirtied up enough to have any character at all? Or is it hopeless?'

Before Walter could answer (I'm not sure any answer was really expected), Whistler went on, 'Have the boy change into what he has there and take him down to the river. Once you get him properly muddied bring him back and well see what we have. You and Henry might take him hunting for turtles, or whatever it is you do. Take your time. And, Walter, where the devil is Mother? If I don't eat soon, I'll never hear the end of it. I'll never get back to work.'

Walter told him he would look in on Mother Whistler on the way down, and we left him still talking to himself and waving into the air. After a few words with an old woman, who I understood to be Mrs. Anna Whistler, Walter led me into a back room where I could change. In a moment he and Henry, his brother, came for me and we walked down to the water's edge. They took me out on a little boat that they had moored there. There were some painting materials, a rickety portable easel and a rusted-out paintbox, still stowed in the bottom of it. But Walter and Henry only talked of Whistler, with mixed adulation and envy. I was ignored until we rowed back to shore. Walter and Henry had checked some lines and waved at three girls on the bank, but had otherwise done nothing. I, being a rather fastidious child, was not a speck dirtier than when we left. I had instinctively avoided even the small amount of mud on the rails of the boat. Even my shoes were clean. Walter looked at me disapprovingly.

'You're not much of a lad, are you Boy?' he said to me. 'Ye've got the dialect of an urchin but the fingernails of a little lord. Me or Henry'd a been in the reever by now at your age, soaked to the skin and an eel in both 'ands. Well, no matter, the Master chose you, and we'll make you presentable, like he says.'

With that, the brothers proceeded to besplatter me with all the jetsam available from that foul river, and I soon not only looked an urchin, I stank like one~or more than one. Henry even gave me a turtle to carry into the studio, meaning to make a small joke on the 'Master'.

When we walked in, Whistler and his mother Anna were having dinner at a small table, lightly but nicely set. They were waited on by a young woman I hadn't noticed before, a servant. Anna was a thin and tidy woman of about 60 or 65, I should say, well dressed in black and white with an unfashionable but very respectable and very well-pressed bonnet of the whitest white. Jemie (as Anna called Whistler) had removed his grey smock and was now seated lazily in striped pants, grey and white, and a long darker grey coat. His tie was muted red of quite a dark shade and was tied very jauntily. Whistler always dressed a bit provocatively by modern standards, or one might say a bit French by English standards (except that even in France he was an ostentatious dandy~Degas once said of Whistler that if he were not a genius he would be the most ridiculous man in Paris). There is a portrait by Sargent of Robert Louis Stevenson lounging in a large wicker chair twirling his mustaches or some such thing,

looking all legs, and everytime I think of my first encounter with Whistler I think of him like that, thin and birdlike, dapper and razor-sharp. Much shorter than Stevenson, he yet had a way of sprawling in a chair that made one feel somehow inferior. He had a way of looking up at one whilst appearing to look down. It was uncanny. And not just for me as a child. Always. Sometimes it was impressive, often infuriating, but always powerful.

Whistler was chewing a piece of bread when we entered and playing with his forelock, which was already grey even at this time. He was thirty five or six then, I believe, but that lock of grey was already his trademark, and he flipped it incessantly. Anna, upon seeing me and the state of my appearance, let out a small cry, and Jemie woke from his reverie. He looked first at her and then at me, and then smiled broadly.

'It's all right, Mother, just another model for the arts. I'm thinking of working him into a new Wapping, as a goblin crawling from the ooze. What do you think?'

'Oh, Jemie, do you really need that turtle in the house? It's still alive, I believe. You can't possibly be thinking of painting a live turtle, dear.'

'Oh, yes, yes. They simply adore that sort of thing at the Academy. A fish on a plate, you know. Absolutely nothing sells better. Shiny scales. Gaping red mouth. Lovely gore. And if you can have a fish on a plate, why not a turtle in the... saltcellar, say? I'll do the entire series. Fish on a plate, turtle in the salt cellar, frog in a spoon. The public will be mad for it. It's genius, by God. I can't wait to tell Burnsie!' [he meant his friend, the poet Algernon Swinburne].

'Well,' interrupted Anna, 'If you must keep the child here, at least take him upstairs, where you sweep your own floors. And put him near the stove. He'll freeze to death with all that mud on him if he don't dry soon. And if the turtle dies, please throw him out promptly (she meant only the turtle, not me~I hope).'

I found that Anna was not easily rattled. She was clearly used to living with the pranks of Jemie and his artistic crowd. The Greaves brothers took me back upstairs to the studio and sat me by the stove. I was already fairly dry. The mud had hardly soaked through, but I was glad for the warmth anyway. While we waited for Whistler to finish his dinner, I chatted with Henry a bit. Walter returned downstairs. Henry said little worth relating, but he was friendly and fairly talkative, once away from his brother. Henry was two years the elder, but one always felt that Walter had a bit more artistic talent. Neither one had much talent, but they both doted on Whistler, seeing him perhaps as their one way out of the family boating business. They acted in the way of apprentices, but they got on very slowly, in the main due to the fact that Whistler was more interested in treating them simply as unpaid 'help.' The Greaves brothers seemed not to mind this, however, and were glad to be of any use at all. Their sister Alice, whom Whistler liked to call 'Tinnie' (he found her rather unmusical~she didn't know his musical terms~he said she had a 'tin' ear), might also be seen about Lindsey Row, 'helping' Whistler. Tinnie avoided Anna for the most part. I later saw Whistler and Tinnie together at various times at Cremorne Gardens or in Hyde Park, and I suppose that the relationship may have occasionally transcended business or even art. Hence Mother Whistler was sailed around at a goodly radius.

Be that as it may, Whistler finally floated up the stairs and joined Henry and me. Walter had gone back to the Greaves' house nearby on the river. The Master then explained to me, in all seriousness, how things would proceed. The turtle we wouldn't need again, and I might 'plop him back in the pond' on my way out. My clothes were now satisfactory, although the amount of mud was perhaps a bit excessive. I could see to that. We wouldn't be working today, since he required preparation: ordering the proper size canvas, toning it, and so on. When he was ready he would send for me. Payment was nine pence a day, not to exceed six hours any one day. With that he dismissed me and immediately began working, moving his easel about and looking for brushes. 'Oh,' he cried, as I was at the top of the stairs. 'Don't cut your hair for anything in the world. If you do I shall have to find someone else. Au

revoir!'

[The following is from chapter 4]

I suppose my near illiteracy might have continued unabated, despite my classes with M'Smina, were it not for another fortunate run-in that occurred at about this time in my life. Conn and I had planned a trip to see Whistler again, and so sometime during that summer of my fourteenth year we went. Whistler had been travelling back and forth from the Leyland's. Frederick Leyland and his wife, Frances, were both having portraits painted, and Whistler spent a good deal of time at Speke Hall. He had become close to Frances, especially (rather too close as it turned out later). Whistler had also become engaged to Frances' sister, Lizzie Dawson. This was a short-lived engagement that went nowhere. Whistler was fond of the ladies, but preferred that they remain someone else's wives, I think.

He was also busy that summer on a grand portrait of the famous writer, Thomas Carlyle. Whistler had finished the painting of his mother in the winter, and it had hung at the Royal Academy Exhibition in the spring. I had seen it there with Mrs. Curlew. Carlyle's portrait was to be similar in colouring and mood~ grey and somber, a study in low tones.

When Conn and I arrived the house was full. We were expected (had been invited), but we were by no means the only ones. We were not early, but everyone else, it appears, was running late. Frances Leyland had just finished a two-hour sitting. Mr. Leyland was downstairs, talking to Anna Whistler. Carlyle had also just arrived. He was to sit for an hour or so after Mrs. Leyland. We were to be fit in anyhow. We had only come for advice (and so that Conn could meet Whistler.) We had both brought a painting for Whistler to look at. When we walked in Carlyle was saying to Anna and the room in general,

'I was about to take off my coat, but I suppose I shall leave it on. That's what the whole thing is about anyway, isn't it? Shall it be called "Carlyle" or "Carlyle's Coat" when it is finished, the painting, do you think?'"

Frances Leyland, just entering the room from the stairs, answered, 'Oh no, Mr. Carlyle. You mustn't say it. Why, it's about the background, of course. Mine is to be called "A Lovely Composition of Blues and Greys... oh, and Mrs. Leyland, too.'" She laughed archly~ a single ascending 'hah-ah~ and moved into the room, next to her husband.

'Frederick and I were just discussing music,' said Anna Whistler. 'I believe you play, Mr. Carlyle?'

'I once did, in a way,' he answered. 'I haven't played in ages.'

'Frederick is quite the virtuoso,' she continued.

'No, no, don't say it, Anna,' interrupted Frederick Leyland. 'If you build me up so, I shall be sure to fall. I only play a bit now and again.'

'You need a piano here,' said Carlyle. 'Then we might judge for ourselves.'

'I know, but Jemmy won't have one,' Anna responded. 'He says they have to be tuned too often, and he can't stand to have the tuner here playing the same note over and over. I always kind of liked it myself. Found it soothing. But you know his nerves.'

'What nerves, Mother?' said Whistler himself, now joining the downstairs party, still wiping his hands on his sleeves. 'I've an oriental patience. I must, to put up with such comments behind my back.' He patted Anna twice on the shoulder and exploded in his little 'hah, hah!'

'Have you all met the boys?' he continued. 'Miles here is another of my disgruntled sitters. He began sitting at birth, so you see, and we've only just wrapped it up. Isn't that, right?'

'No, Sir. It were only a few months.'

'But it felt like a lifetime, eh? Never do it again for less than a quid a hour, I'm guessing.'

'I wish I could get a quid an hour for sitting for James McNeil Whistler,' said Carlyle, emphasizing the Scots McNeil. 'I'd retire today a wealthy man.' Everybody laughed.

'And I'd be bankrupt,' Whistler added. 'Who is your friend, Miles?'

'Thiseers Conn Wycliffe. He be a painter also.'

'Of course he is. Everyone is a painter. Hah, hah! Painting is a universal right. We need a painters' suffrage, wouldn't you say, Frances?'

'Oh, to be sure,' answered she, in some confusion.

'Well, Laddy, let's be started, what,' Carlyle said to Whistler, to save Frances from further embarrassment. 'If I don't get off my legs soon, I'll fall off them.'

Whistler and Carlyle retired upstairs, and we were left to listen to the conversation continue with Anna and the Leylands. Conn and I were mostly ignored. They talked more about music, and I discovered that Whistler had taken his musical titles from a suggestion of Frederick. Mr. Leyland had been learning part of Chopin's rather large oeuvre, and Chopin's use of the word 'nocturne' to describe a certain type of work for the piano seemed appropriate also for the sort of night scenes that Whistler had been painting of the Thames.

I asked Mr. Leyland if he knew Gerber Gamish?

'Pardon? Gerber Gamish, did you say? I don't believe I have had the privilege. Is he a professional musician?'

'Oh, yes Sir! He plays lots o' that there Chopin man. Bery bery fast he plays it. His piano be'ent the sweetest in the world. But he makes a pretty penny when he takes the donkeys out.'

'He has donkeys in his piano!?' asked Frances Leyland, her eyebrows leaving her face entirely.

'No, ma'am. He straps 'em to the front of 'er. That be why she's called "the portable." Gerber says it's the only piano in England you can take cross town and back, and not have to hire a cab on top of it!'

'Fascinating,' answered Mr. Leyland.

'Astonishing,' said Mrs. Leyland.

'Incredible,' said Anna.

But as I look back, I don't think any of them meant it. For they changed the subject completely. Jealously is powerful powerful emotion (that is what Gerber would have said.)

I don't remember what else happened that day. I think Conn and I showed Whistler our paintings and got a few hurried comments. Whistler was tired after a full day of painting, and I think he only wanted to have a drink and a smoke. But the next time I saw him he asked me about Conn. It was several weeks later, when I ran into him outside the Adam and Eve (a pub on the river: I was painting, not imbibing~ if you were wondering), and he said,

'That big lad you were with. What's his name? Dan. Van.'

'Conn.'

'Yes, yes. Conn. I need him to sit in Carlyle's coat for me. You won't do. You're too small. But Conn has the same shoulders as Carlyle. I've done with the head and Carlyle says what do I need him for anymore? He's an old man and he has better things to do than prop up his coat. I don't know what, exactly. Prop up his hat, I suppose, or fill out his gloves. Hah, hah! Anyway, tell Conn to send me a note where I can reach him. And don't get too much black in that water, Laddy! You don't want it to look like ink. There's colour even in black, so you see! Au revoir and Cheerio! At the reservoir!'

I don't think I would have understood this last little joke, except he said 'reservoir' like re-serv-wah. It became one of my own goodbyes, and I don't think anyone in my group ever understood what I was talking about. It didn't matter. They didn't understand what I was talking about at other times, so it was all the same. Best not to ask.

A little known fact of history: Conn did sit for that coat. That portrait is a portrait of Carlyle and my

friend Conn Wycliffe. I saw it many years later in Glasgow, and I said to them I was with, There's me friend Conn Wycliffe. They hadn't a clue what I meant. And they didn't ask.

Alright, but I still haven't told you what helped me to become the astonishing writer I now am (thank the gaelic gods that the Aged Lady is away visiting at the moment~ I would have surely gotten a cuff for that one). What happened is this, as far as you know. I began to read at this time everything I could get my hands on. Unfortunately, Mrs. Curlew's library was rather limited. A few religious tracts left behind by visitors, some ancient issues of Household Words, and a tea-stained copy of Guy Mannering. I wasn't ready for Sir Walter Scott, so I had to look elsewhere. I borrowed a book or two from Mr. Simms, who had grown sons and therefore the books for boys they had left behind. But there were too few of these and I was soon left hungry again for print.

One day, when I had accompanied Conn to Whistler's to watch him paint the great black coat of Carlyle, I happened to meet little Miss Cicely Alexander. Miss Alexander was having her portrait done, too, and her session ended just before Conn's began, as I suppose. She was a few years younger than me, perhaps ten or eleven~ but she had an eye for either Conn or me, we couldn't tell which. She lingered after her sitting, looking at the 'nocturnes' on the wall. She said, half-turning and speaking to no one in particular, 'My mother must be late again. She's always late.' This even though I had just passed her mother sitting downstairs waiting for her. Cicely wanted one of us to talk to her. Conn was busy getting the coat to fold in all the proper places (and he seemed uninterested in Cicely anyway~ she was very young for Conn). So I asked her if her portrait was going well?

'I don't think I should say, here,' she said in a whisper, looking over at Whistler in both fear and exasperation. 'Come out in the hall.' I followed her into the hall and she took me by the sleeve. 'You wouldn't believe what a monster he is!' she said, still in low tones but with great intensity. Her eyes were very wide and she showed me every one of her pretty little teeth, I believe. 'He always forgets to let me sit down. I sometimes go hours without a break! Monday he forgot lunch. If Mrs. Whistler didn't come up to check on me, I think I would faint daily!'

I found all this quite distressing, and said so. But then I said I didn't think he was really a monster. He just forgot.

'Oh, yes, he forgot. He would forget until I fainted right away and never woke up again. Then he might remember!'

I don't know that I saw the complete logic of this, but I gave her my arm with much commiseration and led her downstairs. She pretended great surprise at finding her mother there. As they prepared to walk out, Cicely said that I should come visit her.

'Mother, this young man is going to be a famous artist (I had told her nothing of the kind~ she was making it up). He is the most... best student of Mr. Whistler. Can he come visit? I will show him my sketchbook and he will give me free lessons. He said so if you will give him tea!'

Mrs. Alexander said yes (just to hurry Cicely out the door, I think) and she gave me a card with their address on it. I peeked out the door after them as they strolled down Chene Walk looking for a cab. Cicely looked back and waved grandly and showed me all those teeth once more.

A few days later I called on Cicely. They lived in a large beautiful house somewhere in Brompton. It may have been Drayton Gardens, I don't remember. I only went there the once. Her mother allowed us to go out with a nurse. We ignored the poor nurse entirely. She might have been a piece of baggage for all she was to us that day, I am sure. We kept running ahead to look at things in shop windows, and the nurse would cry out, 'Miss Cicely, do stop running! You are supposed to stay with me, do you hear?' But Cicely would ignore her like a lamppost, and say to me,

'Miles, look at that doll. Isn't it the most hideous thing you've ever seen? I have a doll that is ten

times prettier than that one. I would never put my doll in a dress like that. I would kill myself first!

We came to a bookshop and I stopped, finally interested in something myself. There was a small octavo copy of Blake's Songs of Innocence in the window. An illustrated copy! Oh, how I wanted it. Cicely was impatient, though. She cared nothing for books. When I told her how wonderful Blake was, she said 'Well buy it then. We have things to do!' And when I admitted that I had no money, she said, 'Take it then, you silly boy. I bet you won't. I bet you daren't.'

But I did dare. Before she could say another word I was in the door and out again, with the Blake in my hand. But it was not to be so easy. For everyone had seen me: the nurse, the shopkeeper, and several others I hadn't even noticed. Before I could begin to think of running away, they were all down upon me.

'The little thief!' cried the nurse. 'I told my Lady not to let Miss Cicely walk out with the likes of 'im. And now e's gone and pinched that book, right before me eyes!'

'Got you!' cried the shopkeeper. 'That there book's not for you, you young rascal. But you're for the police. Help! Police! Thief!'

Before he could cry out again, though, a tall slightly stooped man clapped a hand over his mouth and whispered in his ear. The shopkeeper turned angrily... and then recognized the man. He immediately became subservient and said not another word.

'No, the boy was only getting the book for me and he must have thought I came out into the street,' said the man. 'Here I am, Laddy. Now, you and the lassie follow me. We don't need this book after all, Sir (to the shopkeeper). I have one just like it at home, you know.' The man pulled me along and Cicely and the nurse followed. When we got round the corner the man stopped and put his hands on my shoulders.

'You're the puir lad from Whistler's, aren't you?' he said. And then I recognized him. Of course, it was Thomas Carlyle, in a different coat!~ a fawn-coloured greatcoat with a huge collar, just like the black one Conn had been wearing for Whistler. I nodded in answer to his question and he continued, 'If a lad has to be stealing, let it be books, I say. If it had been pocket handkerchiefs or watchfobs I'd a left ye to the man. But I've a soft spot for books, I do~ which'll be a shock to none. And for that book especially. Ye chose well, lad. Ye chose well. If they made books properly available to the young and the puir, people wouldn't have to pinch them, that's what I say! We need a library where people can pinch books legally. That's what a library is for, begod!' He signaled us to follow him and we hurried on.

We went back down to Chene Walk. Carlyle lived only down the street from Whistler. The nurse was lagging behind us, obviously not used to all the walking, and regretting that she would have to walk back as well~ she had been given no purse for cabfare by her Lady. Carlyle took us up to his study. It was crammed with books from floor to ceiling. There was barely room to turn round in. Papers were piled on his desk in endless stacks, and dust covered everything except the seat of his chair. He rummaged through some shelves in the dark corner behind the chair for several moments before coming upon his copy of Blake. He had both the Songs of Innocence and the Songs of Experience. They were illustrated as well, but they looked nothing like the book in the shop window. Carlyle's copy was very old~ it looked as if it may have passed through the hands of Blake himself. Still, it was legible and the binding was good, and it was rather charming to have a well-thumbed copy. One already soft and frayed and smelling of tobacco. I have always liked old books.

Carlyle told me to take it with me. 'And come back when you need something else. Just bring them back when you're finished. And don't drop them in the water or read them in the rain, you know. Oh, and that tall fellow that was with you at Whistler's. With the black eyebrows? He can come, too. Does he read as well?'

'Yes, Sir. He reads all the time. And he writes good, too. His letters be'est something to see, Sir,

letters this tall (I held my hands three or four inches apart) and black as coal. And it don't hardly take him no time at all to write them!

'Well, that would be something to see, I'm sure. You tell your friend he is welcome here. The letters may be somewhat smaller, but I have every book in four languages in this house, and there is no use letting them go to waste. No one I know reads them. You young lads may as well have a go at them. What about you, little Lassie? (to Cicely). Are you a reader?'

'Oh, yes, Sir.'

'You come, too, then. We'll make a party of it. Like one of Dodgson's boating parties, and you can be Alice. You can see yourselves to the door now. Goodbye!'

{Page 267, Chapter 8} ...I sat down on a small grouping of stones at the edge of the little lake. The sky was overcast but it was rather warm for the season. It felt like rain. The city lights reflected off the clouds and lit the surface of the Serpentine with a dim green glow. Tiny insects made circular patterns in this reflection, and one had the impression of a dizzy background of random movement, ill-lit and slightly confusing, like the patterns one's mind makes in the dark, waiting for sleep. At those times, I have fancied I could see the atomic structure of the universe, just as Democritus said, as the little dots and wands flickered in my head; and I felt the chaotic energy of the All-and-All first hand, as if it might at any moment disintegrate and re-integrate me at will into nothing or everything. Now I felt the same. As if those inchoate patterns disappearing on the surface of the water were the only final reality one could hope for. My hands, which I could also see~ what were they but another pattern, shorter or longer lived? And the mind that was seeing them: was it a flickering dancing pattern of dots and wands more permanent than my hands? Or less permanent? Or no more or less?

As I thought of Sif, and my inconceivable loss of her, I began to question my own control over what I had thought to be my own emotions. I had always known that my control over a situation was limited by the actions of others. But my own actions began to take on the same mysterious qualities. What had I done? And why? And what was to be expected of a future where even my own life seemed to move of its own volition, arriving at places willy-nilly. What of a position like the one I found myself in, where one could only say, 'This is not where I thought I would be now'?

Just as my self-composure was unravelling~ my thoughts going to pieces in the way thoughts will at such times, with the visual world swirling and the internal world caught madly in that buzzing whirlpool of its own making~ suddenly a larger ripple in the whole fabric made me re-align: whether with fear or only with the effect of a larger, more substantial agent that required my attention, I do not know. But the surface of the Serpentine suddenly changed! The tiny insects were superceded by a greater force. Symmetrical ripples, originating some yards away, made me aware of the movement of a more massive body nearby. At first I thought it was just a swan frightened by some creature of the night, or maybe a large fish rising to the surface for its own reasons. But some electricity in the air, some fire in the atmosphere that surrounded the entire occurrence suggested to me that it was something else. I felt a thrill, a serrated push from within, a distant moan of the spirit that set me on edge. Not frightened, my awareness yet increased in a way that I can't explain. I watched the lake expectantly, as in a dream where one knows what is there but cannot utter what it is.

And then the concentric circles began to outline a head, a head rising slowly, awash in long flowing hair and dark green leaves. Then the shoulders broke the surface, and there were clothes, or the remains of clothes~ long rags clinging still to the rising body. What had once been a dress of white, or perhaps pale blue. But now the figure was clear of the surface, all except the feet which remained in the water.



She was naked, beyond the now useless dress which fell away in dripping tatters and floated about her knees. A beautiful woman she was, or had been, that was clear. Tall, thin, with long arms and neck. But it was her face that coloured all. Her eyes were wild with some internal madness, her lips half-parted in some eternal cry. Her eyebrows arched to heaven, she looked first up at the clouds and then down at the water. She seemed completely unaware of my presence, and I felt that I could not have gotten her attention regardless. This was a role not to be interrupted.

As she looked again at the sky and held out her arms, as if in preparation for something, or as if making some wordless plea to the nameless gods, I noticed, just above the black delta of her wet netherhair, the slight swell of her belly. And I knew. I knew why she was here. I knew what she had done.

Quite suddenly she began to chant a long meandering verse, at first seemingly to herself. But as the verses changed, they began to be directed at a person, a person who may or may not have been present for her. The verses flowed on, beautiful iambs all end-rhymed, but chanted so naturally, with so much meaning, one barely noticed the scheme. One was only aware that it all danced with a sad cadence too regular to be prose. The words had a terrible terrible power to them, and her voice, cutting with a clear low reediness, put in thrall the very stars and moon, and all stopped to hear her self-elegy. The curve of her words even had a strange sound, and an odd turn she gave to 'Ghosts' and 'poesy' left me eerily nostalgic, as when reading an old book or seeing a picture of a man long dead.

This is what she said that night~ if my memory, and later dreams of that scene may be trusted.

*[The Self-Elegy of Harriet Westbrook Shelley]*

1

I look down into the moss-green pool  
my own reflected face flanked by clouds  
inhabiting yet the heavens cold and cruel  
unloose the binding dresses destined shrouds  
I speak as listening to ghosts aloud  
whispering my life unto the wind  
promises broken promises once avowed  
overheard by ghosts ghosts will not rescind

and awful Queen of Ghosts these promises will tend

Water swirling through my sinking skirts  
washing billowing blouse and filling dresses  
with muddy Serpentine swelled with rains  
to rinse with ash-blond foam my flowing tresses

Water chilling skin with cold caresses  
taking our child and me down slowly dreamily  
almost weightless as the tide progresses  
its silty sound swallowing me and our baby  
will swallow you too My Love as Your Soul at last confesses

2

We haunt these waters gliding scaleless finless  
naked with the naked fishes glinting  
They like us adrift forever sinless  
rising up from sunless sea-paths squinting  
at dancing rays filtering down hinting  
of warm red light above, hot-skinned creatures  
gliding through air and Fate's breath unrelenting  
burdened only by wind and rock-hard features  
and voices mouthed all round, soundless unseen preachers

Listen to the water flowing over my grave  
Listen to the current running down to sea  
washing among the rounded pebbles a-lave  
with muddy sediment. This soil will, free  
from stream bed and bank, resalt the mineral sea  
with the salt and dust of me and our baby's bones  
It will flavor the ocean floor, far Normandy  
and the coast of farther Leghorn as it moans  
with the Tyrrhene tidal winds squalling in blackest tones

I did not even know Ophelia, never  
doubting but 'gratitude and admiration,'  
I saw you write, 'demand I shall love her *forever*'  
But what sad dreamer dreaming since time began  
kept such vow being but flesh and man  
unless his vow and dream might coincide  
which self-encircling artist *will* not plan  
and god, foreseeing future, matches bride  
with dream unchanging, dreamers dreaming side by side

Mediterranean waves washed you ashore

*you* wept for by all as genius lost  
while I must grovel in London mud, no more  
bemoaned than fishes or frogs or flotsam wave-tossed  
For Poesy I am but the cost  
staring skyward glassy-eyed from Serpent's flank  
Of me Faith's Child the poets never guessed  
You will Muse but never Woman thank  
For you my maidenhead naively led twice sank

You say you cannot love what you do not  
but I am lost My God unchaste unmarried  
unloved and then from pitying hands unsought  
a child that unfathered must never be carried  
My past my present haunts cannot be buried  
Fled you think a love is right or not  
if not then virtue is to be remarried  
But I am no mistake to be unbought  
as fish of ghostly form I cannot be uncaught

3

That Deep that sparkles with riddles and grinning monsters  
spread out around you though morning had dawned clear cloudless

and blue, sky reflecting sanely exactly  
the silvery surface. Waveless nearly windless  
the mast hardly cocked the stockstill lazy compass  
Beneath this idyll Naiades eyed their prey  
above Erinyes preened and whetted careless  
The Sea grave of all waters watched lidless fey  
the sea floor swelled to receive the salt of one more your clay

Fate tempted She rose from her deep abode  
flanked by Furies followed by millions  
out from their caves of darkness Sea Ghosts flowed  
in circling waves of dancing writhing cotillions  
and Percy you saw before you joined the billions  
my billowing blouse rippling from every crest  
my eyes in the faces of Triton's minions  
and seaweed that sewed each frond a lover's tress  
enwrapping you Love like curling sea snakes vengeance-blest

Gulls, oyster-albine bacchantes, screamed *alone*  
or beating wing for breast tearing through the veils  
of Delphic mists as swirling maidens swore *atone*  
Below there leapt blue dolphins, breaching whales

who slapping flukes on briny greenswell wail  
a long-drawn song an ocean jeremiad  
awash with centuries-old earth-circling tales  
of languishment and death and bones half-hid  
by silt and wavy seaweed and eddies Neptune-bid

Pipers primly skipped from threatening wave  
Scuttling crabs retreated always sideways  
every beast that day did itself save  
from Supernature's cast in Passion Plays  
as Venus made a count of all the days  
crushing under dainty goddess slipper  
or whitest barest foot him who pays  
the uttermost farthing and then must kneel and kiss her  
lips with redeemed lips that then must ever miss her

4

Someday when I awake when I arise  
when earth and water mix in Parousia  
and look my drowned poet in the eyes  
as Cronus meets the eyes of mother Rhea  
and Uranus the gaze of mother Gaea

remember once you loved me knew not why  
marred by Adam's sin *non culpa mea*  
son of father's dearth back to Sky  
who rains on Gaea as a cloud gone floating by

That dark night unrestful I will wake  
beneath the blowing cattails lulling you  
to sleep, that night I will at last forsake  
the quiet earth and overreaching dew~

At midnight belly rounding with the moon  
I will arise Astarte-like from the rushes  
I will arise respired too soon  
like her whose presence all the Spirit hushes  
display the perished bloom and hectic flushes  
the falsely beating heart and warming womb  
the graying lips of red and mother's blushes  
I will awake untimely unentomb  
bones best left enearthed and flesh and feeling numb

Then when Chaos stirs the bloody Earth  
remixing limbs eyes Souls hearts



and making every death a crying birth  
infusing salty water into parts  
confused by Change and Time and Judgment starts  
my water and your storm will be the same  
I, Immortal Bird, will sing the Arts  
and you will mouthe my pain not in name  
but kissed from storm to storm no weather-lover's blame

You who hate the seed for taking root  
will also hate the cloud that whitens high  
the storm that overwaters virgin shoot  
bass-boom thunder and the infant cry  
of washed-out life weakening to die  
beneath unsheltered sky. You will curse  
the rain that fills the drowning stream and I  
Skylark blithe but long deflowered and worse  
unignorant of pain to innocently coerce

my strains to pure profusion~Not Purity  
but Sacred Soilure, the Dirt of Ages  
will bless my songbird bones~I will cloudless see  
what you must miss unmuddied: the ghost-watched wages

of sin to Art and Love are not on gold-gilt pages  
in Heaven but are writ in Runes upon the Earth  
bloody kana venting Vulcan's rages  
at Nazarene. Magdalene knew: not worth  
pap a Pure Conception or a Virgin Birth

5

I will learn to rain and you to rust  
The mud will take us both and both the sky  
Sea-silt and Cloud-froth will bed our breath and dust  
and we will learn to live and so to die  
For now I wait the rain drips past my eye  
you dig deep beneath the seas of Rome  
The seas will rise and fall in circles by the bye  
and when the sea floor meets the starry dome  
soaked and salty you will take our baby home

Just as she finished it began to rain. She stood for a moment or two longer, as if waiting for some empyreal reaction, or an answer from the unknown listener. But I heard nothing and she heard nothing and she sank back down into the lake, ripples rolling out again as before in ever-widening circles.

I remained in a daze for perhaps ten minutes before I began to be seriously chilled by the rain and the cool night breeze. Then I huddled myself back home and sat drying in front of the fire thinking of what had happened. I stared at the flames for hours in the belief, with or without reason, that the apparition had not been random. That whether or not *she*~ that is the ghost of Harriet~ meant me to hear, somehow I was meant to hear it. This belief does not tally well with my thoughts just preceding her recitation on the chaos of the dots and fluttering wands and meaningless motes in the eye of the universe. But I only report what I felt. And my feelings that night were far from consistent.

At the time I did not know who she was or what it all was about. I only saw what it meant for me. But I had understood what she said of Percy Shelley, and I meant to find out who she might be. What her

relationship to Shelley had been, and why she was in the Serpentine. It took many weeks of research to discover that she was Harriet, and that Harriet had been Percy's first wife, before Mary Godwin. She had been a sixteen-year-old daughter of a tavern keeper when she met Shelley. Percy was only nineteen himself. The marriage soon soured, due, if we are to believe Percy, on grounds of intellectual inequality. Harriet was beautiful, but apparently unable to maintain Shelley's astonishing level of discourse. So her physical charms were quickly superseded by another. One nearly as charming and much better read: Mary, daughter of two writers, William Godwin and Mary Wollstonecraft.

I also discovered~what I already knew~ that Harriet had been pregnant when she drowned herself in the Serpentine in 1816. Her body was not discovered for two weeks, and a ghastly discovery it must have been. Beyond all this, I found (and I believe I am the first to say it) that Shelley may have been the father of this child. Shelley and Mary had fled to Italy two years previously, to be rid of public opinion at their cohabitation. But in late 1815 they returned to England. As it turns out, Mary was also pregnant. Nine or ten months prior to Harriet's suicide, Shelley had been travelling back and forth from London to the countryside where he and Mary were now living. Imagine the situation. Mary is irritable in the cottage, due to her confinement, and Shelley is spending much time away from her. This much is known, for there is a large body of correspondence extant between Shelley and Mary. Because Shelley was often away, and because he needed to at least *voice* constant concern over the health of Mary, many letters crossed during these months. Mary, in fact, complains often of Shelley's absence. Then imagine this. While in London, Shelley runs across Harriet. Still full of guilt from his abandonment of her, and also sexually keyed up due to the circumstances~ Mary's pregnancy and his absence~ he falls to the attractions of a still young and beautiful Harriet. For old times sake, or what you will, they re-unite temporarily. Afterwards, Shelley repents of his weakness and flees again. But it is too late. This time, an older and more fertile Harriet has conceived. Months later, knowing she cannot expect Shelley to return, and fully recognizing that now no other man will ever have her, and fearing that society will ostracize her even though she is having the child of her own husband (since she has no way to prove it), she decides to kill herself. She goes to Hyde Park at night and throws herself off the bridge.

There is no way to know whether it happened this way or not. It is true that Harriet would have been distraught enough to consider suicide no matter who she was pregnant by. But it is doubtful that in her situation she would have slept with a man besides Shelley without some sort of promise or plan. Then she should have had at least him to turn to in an emergency. She and this lover might have fled to America or the Continent or any number of things. That she would have slept with someone of absolutely no means simply from loneliness is not of course out of the question. But it is much much easier to believe that she could justify sleeping with a man who was, after all, her husband~ despite the complications of the situation. And that she may have thought she could woo him back by sleeping with him. Nothing would be more natural, don't you see. The poor girl may have even been happy when she first discovered the pregnancy, thinking surely this would weigh quite heavily with the conscience of Shelley. She may have found, however, that it did not. Or she may have come to that conclusion on her own, after more consideration, and remembering how little real conscience Shelley had ever displayed.

Regardless, I became convinced of it myself. What is more, I learned that Shelley also died by drowning! Only six years later, while sailing in the Mediterranean, he and a friend were swept overboard in a storm off the coast of Leghorn.

This was the subject I had been looking for. Almost immediately I began working. I had always been told that there is nothing new under the sun. That all the great subjects had been exhausted by 1870. That is why, I was told, the Impressionists had to begin obsessing with color, and the Post-Impressionists with line, and the Moderns with more and more arcane and theoretical concerns. There was nothing left *to* paint; so one had to now just look at the paint, not the painting. One's subject was no longer external to the canvas; one's subject *was* the canvas. Art then began to evaporate until, with Duchamp, it disappeared altogether. But I am getting ahead of myself. At that time, I simply felt I had found an important subject (or been granted it by the Muse). Here was a true story, set in the recent past, yet untapped by any poet or painter or musician~what Wagner might have done with it! Coincidence, the Sea, death, pregnancy, return, Fate, penance and retribution. The great contest of male and female, decided by the womb and the sea.

## *New York Times* - Op Ed Page

Readers of the NYT are likely to assume that every categorical complaint that could be made *has* been made, and that at this late point in history we are just being updated on the breaking subcategorical squabbles. If you think this, pay attention, because you are about to be apprised of a rare bit of news. The news is that a living artist, who may be famous within your lifetime (if you are, say, five years old, and if you live to be, say, 140), has recently learned to read and write, and he is ready to speak. This has not happened since around 1870—when James Whistler took up a pen and gave the critics the thorough dressing-down they deserved.

This may interest you for two reasons. One, because you love art and you have just been waiting for this moment. Two, because your favorite spectator sport is bear-baiting, where an overconfident lump of fur and muscle is lowered into a pit of snarling vicious wolves and slowly converted to mush.

No seriously, I know you are an intellectual and therefore above both of these things. You are more likely thinking, *This is not news. In America, any loudmouth can say whatever he wants. Big deal.* Yes, but when was the last time you actually read anything important by a living artist about art? Artists may sometimes write blurbs to explain their work; or, if they are realists, they may occasionally write about technique; or, if they are PoMos, they may agree to a relaxed, very cool interview—one where they may not even be wearing a shirt. But art theory is out of their hands. When you read about art in books and magazines and newspapers, you are reading the opinions and the theories of non-artists. *All* your information is from critics and scholars and pundits and curators and dealers.

Another example: for many years MOMA has been giving lectures to aspiring artists. Who are the lecturers? Great artists? No. Curators and Art Historians. Who taught the Curators and Art Historians about art? Great artists? No. Other Curators and Art Historians.

Try for a moment to conceive exactly how absurd this is. Is there any other field that is defined so completely by people who do not practice it?

Of course I know the standard reply: *art has always been like that. Michelangelo had to answer to the Popes*, and so on. But the standard reply is from people who do not care to make distinctions. The fact is that artists have never been as disenfranchised from art as they are now. The kings and popes were less tyrannical than the current art market. In this market it is not just the client that must be consulted. If an artist has any ambition beyond the decorative markets, he must also subsume his creativity within the expectations and careers of the critics, curators, galleries owners, editors, and scholars of art. Michelangelo had to fight with one man to paint the Sistine Ceiling as he wanted it. He had to consult with one committee (that of the Signory) to sculpt David as he wanted him. And Michelangelo won his battles. When was the last time an artist won an argument with Theory? We

don't know. We have never seen an artist have an argument with Theory. The artists we know of were chosen *by* Theory. That is why we know of them.

*Well*, you may say, *why don't the artists say something. It's a free country.* The well-known artists don't say anything because they don't need to. They are rich and famous. They got rich and famous by doing the visual work of Theory and keeping quiet. Less well-known artists keep quiet for the same reason: if they are ever to get rich and famous it will be thanks to Theory, thanks to the priests of PoMo, thanks to the kingmakers in NYC and London. The other artists, those completely outside Theory, do not speak out because they are afraid of being browbeaten by the "experts." They are silenced by the realization that they can never compete in intellectual debate with those who have made a career of it. Artists not interested in postmodernism are usually not interested in art as a debating skill, and so they are understandably print-shy.

You may think you already know all the important battle-lines: the cries of censorship and free-speech, and multi-culti, and Guiliani v. obscenity, and Helms v. Finley, and so on. But all that is just a side-show for the aesthetically impaired. A diversion. A thrilling political spectacle, no doubt, but it has nought to do with art. No, the real fight is between artists and "art experts", and it has been waged for over a century. Whistler wrote, in 1877, "The war, of which the opening skirmish was fought the other day in Westminster [when he sued the art critic Ruskin for libel], is really one between the brush and the pen." Notice that Whistler was well aware that things would only get worse. And they have. We have reached the point now where art is a closed meeting, and all the officers are non-artists. A production run by the suits. Art has been redefined to meet the needs of administration: it would be unrecognizable to any artist from Praxiteles to Van Gogh. Art no longer generates artifacts; it generates *words*. Books, articles, reports, catalogues, inventories, receipts.

Robert Rosenblum, an administrator at the Guggenheim, was quoted recently that "by now the idea of defining art is so remote I don't think anyone would dare to do it." The meaning of this is very clear to artists. Rosenblum says that it means art can be anything. Total creative freedom. Artists know that it means just the opposite. It means that art has long since been defined (by Theory) and that there is no reason to argue about it anymore. It means that the critics and curators and other administrators of art are satisfied with the status quo (and why should they not?), and that any continued discussion by artists will be considered insubordinate.

Well, Mr. Rosenblum, at the risk of seeming a Berserker, I demur. Your very presence at the debate mystifies me. The definition of their own field is for *artists* to decide. All other opinion is finally an intrusion. Whistler said, "A life passed among pictures makes not a painter—else the policeman at the National Gallery might assert himself. As well allege that he who lives in a library must needs die a poet."

My Dear Reader, you will never again see an artistic renaissance until artists are free of this pernicious and illogical influence. Until you realize that art has been coopted, like everything else, by profiteers of one sort or another. Until you understand that the only way around this is to defrock the priests. Think of this like the Protestant Reformation (I get to be Luther—O joy). You do not need

"critical distance" to speak to art or the artist any more than you need intercession in order to pray. You only need eyes.

*Miles Mathis*



# On John Currin

## Part 1

*by Miles Mathis*



Michael Kimmelman drops many names in his article (*New York Times* 11/21/03) on John Currin: Holbein, Durer, Houdon, Goya, Pontormo, Mantegna, Carracci, and Van Eyck, among others. And while it is true that Currin has stolen his compositions and poses from almost everyone (which used to be called lack of imagination, although Currin, we are assured, is a painter of great imagination) his paintings have nothing to do with any of these artists, neither in style nor content. Technically he may be marginally better than Hockney or Kitaj, but comparing Currin to Holbein is a cruel joke upon them both. Currin has more in common with Fischl, although he doesn't even achieve Fischl's nuancing—which is not meant as a compliment to Fischl. In thinking of the old masters, the following ideas come to mind: beauty, subtlety, depth, power, true emotion. Conversely, we are told that Currin excels in "cheap pathos", "vacant ritual images," and "fake sentiments." This is all meant by Kimmelman to be high praise. It is high praise because Koons and Richter are also masters of banality and vulgarity, like Warhol and all the rest before them. Rich and famous guys, all.

The message is clear: the tenets and attitudes of Modernism are still very much alive, despite the supposed end of Postmodernism, the rise of Pluralism, and the resuscitation of Realism. Serious art is still out of fashion, and shallowness is still ascendant. What is required is transparent recombination coupled with an aloof pose. A plastic technique propped up by an imitation artist. An ersatz form representing an ersatz idea created by an ersatz person. The people who matter in NYC are still fascinated by the "vacuous and desperate", i.e. themselves. They gravitate to "intentionally bad painting" and "campy and debased subjects" since this leaves open the very real possibilities that they can hope to be subjects of well-known artists, or even the artists themselves (with the proper promotion).

Kimmelman says that "Currin seems to enjoy the mildly creepy, fetishistic absurdity of his anachronistic women." And why should he not? He lives in big-city modern America; who else is there? Although there is nothing "anachronistic" about the creepy absurd fetishism exhibited by Currin and his models, there is everything symptomatic about it. Like all the other contemporary painters who think holding a mirror to the public's pathetic self is artistically fascinating, Currin mimics its vulgarity, it squeals and cringes, and then it runs to buy more mascara and tighter pants. *Of course* art-as-pathology remains on top—to whom could art-as-subtlety-and-depth appeal to anymore? Where is the market? Poor librarians in Bangor or Bethesda don't drive the economy.

If Currin's content is fake emotion, barbed wit, and cheap pathos, then he obviously has more in common with someone like Bruce Nauman—yesterday's child—and his technique is really beside the point. Nauman and Hirst and countless others have proved that such content requires no technical mastery at all. *That* is why some people are confused by Currin: they wonder why he went to all that trouble, just to give us the same old cleverly empty basket. Kimmelman tells us that "Eyes in Mr. Currin's work tend to be black holes, sucking up light." And even more specifically, "Mary O'Connell's eyes, flat disks, are the emotional vortex of the picture." And there is the contradiction that drives the mystery: how can vacuous eyes be an emotional vortex, how can art be driven by a theory in which vacuity and banality are positive virtues, and how can art history possibly be served by newspaper copy that offers up such theory as the *ne plus ultra* of culture, as fascinating fare for the educated and discerning reader?

## On John Currin - Part 2

by Miles Mathis



Last week, the first of my weekly counter-criticisms on ARC was taken from a letter I sent to the *New York Times*: I therefore had no chance to introduce this column. I will do that now. My writing is counter-criticism, rather than simply criticism, in that it is a response from the artist to the critic. It is not meant as a response from writer to writer, or from academic to academic. I will not obey the rules of such dialogue. I will defend art, using my pen, but I will do so *as an artist*. I will not strive to be impersonal or objective. I will not attempt to be calm or cool or to have "critical distance." Most of all, I will not pretend that I have no stake in the game. The critics try to give the impression that they are impartial bystanders, educating us to our own benefit. They do this by the omission of most pertinent facts. The number and extent of these facts will become clearer as this column becomes older. For now, suffice it say that nothing you have been told for a century is true and this least of all: that the critic is good for art.

This column is also different than anything else you have likely read about art, in that I admit to having a plan of attack that uses every tooth in my head. The critics and avant garde artists and academics have slandered art without scruple for decades. There is no reason I should not talk about whatever I want, at whatever volume I choose: no one can accuse me of uncalled-for emotion.

Now, on to the current topic, which still happens to be John Currin. Currin was deemed worthy of two articles in the *New York Times* last week. I will likewise honor him with a second reply here; an interesting subject not covered in the first article will allow me to broaden my counter-critique even further.

In the interview by Deborah Solomon (Nov. 16, *NYT Magazine*), Currin begins by being correct and ends by being correct—unfortunately the rest of the article intervenes. He says in the first paragraph, "I have not seen the will to make a masterpiece in American art. What's here? Albert Bierstadt? He's small beer compared to the Europeans." True. True but curious. For I have seen Currin and I still have not seen the will to make a masterpiece. The interview is about him. What is his point?

In the last paragraph, Currin says, "Progressive ideas are just a machine for ruining art." Yes. And refreshing it is to see him say it. But again, how does that tie into his own art? Currin has debased himself by accepting these very ideas. He is a cog in that machine of ruination, by choice. Does he really not see this, or is he showing "barbed wit" even concerning himself?

Let us look at these progressive ideas, as they are implied in the bulk of the interview, and see if we can find out. It may seem odd, but the following quote (by the artist's father) leapt out at me above all others in the interview: he said, in response to a comment by the interviewer that the Currin family seemed culturally attuned to one another, "Oh, please, don't describe us as a cultured family! It makes me wince! I would prefer that you talked about my heavy drinking and Nazi regalia. That's the correct narrative."

Hmm. Kind of clever, understandable from one point of view, and yet terribly strange. It was understandable in that you can see the fear a successful family from Connecticut and New York City might have in being depicted as east coast elitists, especially in an article about art in the *Times*. But the interviewer was nowhere near the topic of elitism. "Cultured" has not entered the no-no list of non-PC words, at least not until now. Besides, the interviewer said "culturally attuned *to one another*." This is not at all the same as "cultured." All this is only peculiar until one recognizes that the Currins probably *would* rather be seen as drunken closet-Nazi's than as cultured: it is closer to the norm. One suspects that they may shop at Wal-mart from a sense of duty, and visit Six-Flags New England as a token of solidarity. I am only surprised that Mr. Currin, pere, did not mention "Southpark" or "The Osbornes" as a counterweight to his wife's comments about Debussy and Brahms.

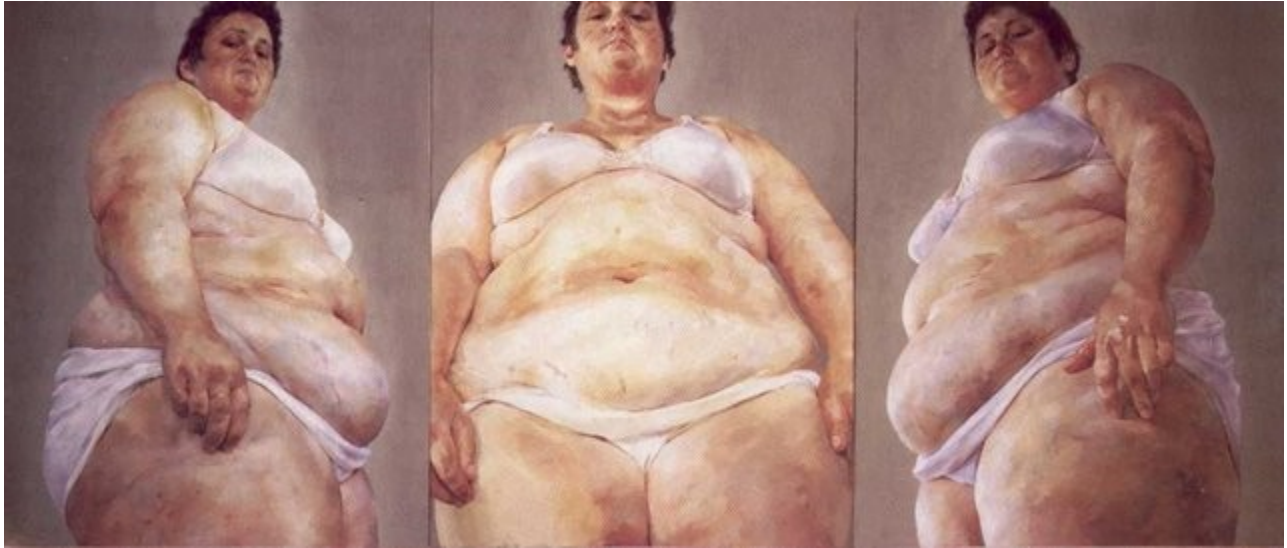
This is not off-topic, since the rest of the article supports a reading of the Currins, including John, as overly socialized if not overly cultured. The artist himself says, "I was trying to be a tormented painter [in college]. I didn't want to be a nice guy from Connecticut." To be fair, many young artists go through this posing phase, and it would be excusable if Currin had outgrown it. But he has simply traded one pose for another. For he continues, "Part of getting out of art school is getting over the idea that failure is an emblem of integrity." No more being tormented for Currin. That pose doesn't sell anymore. That is strictly Van Gogh, you know: old school. The pose that sells now is the "skewer of the bourgeoisie." That pose has been a big seller since the French Revolution, and it has been the

*required* pose for the last fifty years, at least. To adopt that pose, one must realize that "taste can stifle"—a fact Currin learned from his father, according to the interviewer. And that takes us full circle: an artist who is skewering the bourgeoisie can hardly be seen in an interview to be part of a cultured (that is, tasteful) family. Only a family on the furthest reaches of far-left insiderism, one so cool it can joke about Nazi regalia, has the proper stance from which to attack the bourgeoisie. From there it is no big deal to be accused of vulgarity or vacuousness, since they are the tools of a witty and ironic art. The only fear is being supposed to be different, or worse, better: for then one cannot hope to become famous.

Currin admits that his career is a "quest for fame." Not a quest for great art or the masterpiece, or even the modern substitute, relevance. No, Currin wants fame. Like his counterpart in Hollywood, he wants a "lot of attention." By the current standards, it is anathema to be called cultured, but being a phony is fine. One might say it is *de rigueur*. For instance, did Currin choose canvases 26 x 32 because they were what he needed? No, he choose them "because that was the size no one was doing." It was done "to stand out." Such admissions are now standard fare, and Currin does not even think of toning it down. His hero Richter has admitted to raw ambition and made it work for him, so the audience is a known quantity. The audience now expects the artist to act like the stockbroker, and so Currin's later analogy to Wall Street is a commonplace. The executives who buy his work could hardly be likely to understand the sensibilities of a real artist, but a painter who will do anything for fame or money is someone they can relate to. That the art may skewer the bourgeoisie is dismissed by such clients in one of several ways: either they are too rich to be considered bourgeois or they are so sure of their status that no amount of skewering can touch them. They are like the kings who hired fools to insult them. A king can wave off any amount of abuse with equanimity: he will still be king tomorrow. The fool may not have his head.

# On Jenny Saville

by Miles Mathis



*L'ideal a cessé, le lyrique a tari.—Saint-Beuve*

I read a piece on Jenny Saville in *ARTnews* in November and have been waiting for the opportunity to comment on it. Now is my chance, I suppose. Saville, along with Currin and Fischl and a handful of others, is one of the few figurative painters to make it big in the last couple of decades. She was one of the early discoveries of Saatchi Gallery, London—that prince of promoters—and she has since ridden the wave of feminist commentary on the body that has become a staple of modern politics and political art. Technically she does have some talent, but that is not what has made headlines for her. It is her content that has made her so appealing to a certain sort of viewer.

In the eyes of her supporters she is a crusader, brutally honest and unflinching in the presence of hard truths. In the article we are told, "She describes the subjects of her work as 'images of extreme humanness,' even in the case of her recent images of emotional and physical pain and violence...."

Where does this pain and violence come from? Why is Saville, who grew up a normal middle-class girl in Scotland, who had encouragement from her family to be an artist, who went to the Glasgow School of Art, who travelled through Europe as a girl to look at art, who had art books and lessons and role models, why is she so full of pain and violence? According to the article it is because her artistic role models were men. Sargent, Rembrandt, Soutine, de Kooning. All men. Horrible.

She escaped from this nightmare by discovering the writings of Julia Kristeva, Helene Cixous and Luce Irigaray, who "maintain that cultural standards in Western society remain largely phallogentric." We are to understand that this explains why she should want to paint Woman as scarred victim, as bloated peeling object, as giant mass of angst-ridden blubber. Possibly the most informative quote in the piece is this: "I'm more fascinated by the stories that imprint themselves on the body. Whether its a fat, injured, or scarred body, it has undergone a journey to get there."

Has it? Many many miles back and forth to the refrigerator? That harrowing car ride across town for rhinoplasty and lipo?

I'm sorry, I can't even take all this seriously anymore. The political transparency of articles like this, the absurd levels of pathos, the fake seriousness of it all preclude my even pretending to sympathize.

God knows we all have problems—the world can be a horrible place, even for those of us living in the "sanitized first world". We were picked on as children and are misunderstood as adults. We don't have enough friends and lovers, our governments are wholesale failures of one sort or another, and everything we touch is poisoned. And I am very sorry that Saville was a fat girl who didn't get asked to the prom or whatever. But none of this is an excuse for her art.

The title of the article is *The Body Unbeautiful*. This is supposed to imply some sort of emotional depth that *The Body Beautiful* could never match. Saville says so herself. Ugliness is itself a sign of distinction. It is the sign of a journey.

Balderdash. If beauty is only skin deep, so is ugliness. In which case it does not mean anything like what Saville intends. She wants to make herself into a martyr. But she is not a martyr: she is just another young woman made sick by her victimhood. She has found no subject greater than her own emotional turmoil, much of it manufactured by these women she is reading. Make no mistake, I am a far-left liberal in most aspects, in favor of fair treatment in all ways. But I simply do not buy the argument that this is still about equality. I don't buy the argument that women in the US and Europe are suffering great institutional cruelty at the hands of men. No more than men are suffering at the hands of women. That "phallogocentric" adjective offends me, as a progressive. It is just a shibboleth. It is a rallying standard for women with a grudge; women who want superiority. The US and Great Britain are now so far from being phallogocentric it isn't even worth breath responding to.

Besides, Saville's art isn't really about any of that. That is just the pretext for her particular pathology. She admits that she went to the these writers seeking justification for her art. And she found it, no surprise there. Her fascination for ugliness predated her acquaintance with the feminist justification of it. It is interesting to note that Lucian Freud had no need for a masculist justification for his analogous fascination with ugliness. He just likes ugly. Modernism justified his pathology for him after the fact, and Saville benefits from a double justification: both modernism and feminism like ugly. It happens to fit in with their deconstructive tendencies.

But is there really any depth there, political or otherwise? I don't think so. The political depth of Saville's art goes precisely as deep as would the art of a bald man "speaking for all bald men and the terrors they have endured." Go back to her "extreme humanness" quote. Are ugly, scarred, fat people really more human than other people? Let's flip that over and see how it looks. What if I said, "I paint beautiful people because they are more human. Their beauty means to me that they have probably done more interesting things, and are basically superior." You would think I was bonkers. But Saville's quote, although just as bonkers, is politically correct. It is allowable.

And Saville's politics is not even consistent, as I see it. If she is selling the feminist party line that all the media wants is skinny girls with high cheekbones, then she should be pushing the counterpoint: beauty comes in many shapes and sizes, and all that. Rubens and Renoir found a way to paint fat women with love and tenderness. But Saville's women are made to look their worst. She uses her



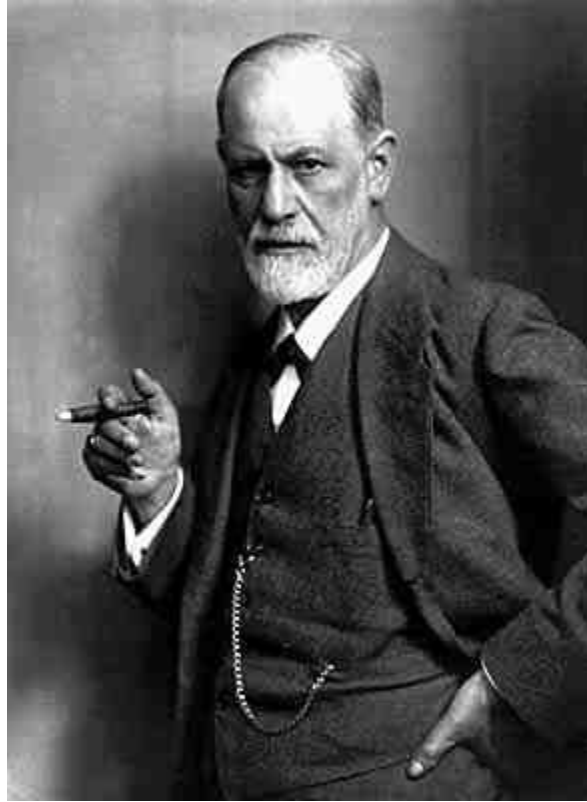
broken fracture to make the skin as repellent as possible. Saville seems to imply that women have the right not only to be fat, they have the right not to wash their hair or cut their toenails, and the right to wear underwear six sizes too small. If men have a problem with this, it is further proof of their shallowness.

What makes it all even more distasteful is that Jenny is painting *herself* as the ugly, scarred one, meaning, by her translation, the one who has been on the interesting journey (as opposed to those pretty, empty people). It is art as self-promotion, as self-exegesis, as therapy, as exhibitionism, as diary. It is the sad cry "look at me—I am interesting even though I am fat. In fact, I am interesting *because* I am disgusting." I don't buy it. People are no more interesting because they are disgusting than they are interesting because they are not disgusting. To interest me, either as an artist or a dinner companion, you have to do more than look really bad (or good).

I am not interested in seeing a male or a female artist post either their own beauty or their own ugliness on the world as a sign of spirituality. I am not interested in seeing any sort of transcendent victimhood. The only reason the world has put up with Van Gogh's pathology is that he had no idea he was exhibiting it, and because it is so self-effacing and naive. And because some of the paintings are fantastic regardless. But as a rule pathology makes poor art. Especially when it is self-centered and manufactured. This is what the moderns have not understood.

I look forward to the day when women finally come out above all this negative feeling and begin to feel good about themselves physically. That is the last equal right, one they have not given themselves. I am certainly not keeping them from it. I would love to see more beautiful paintings of women by women. And to make the equality even tighter, I would love to see more beautiful paintings of men by women. In this last case, I don't think we would complain of being treated as objects—we would understand that we were loved.

# Concerning Art Interpretation



*by Miles Mathis*

Analyzing art has become a big business. In fact, it is much bigger than the business of art itself. Besides critics, we have art historians, art administrators, art professors, museum staff, gallery staff, magazine editors, and various other experts in the field. These people write books and articles, prepare lectures, give guided tours, release press kits, write government proposals, and so on. And, in many ways, the business of art itself has become analyzing art. Even given an artist and an artwork, it is often hard to say where the interpretation stops and the creation starts. A fair percentage of the artists are analyzers of art themselves: the "art" is in the analysis. With the avant garde it is often difficult to separate the artifact from the press kit. In many cases, the press kit is more interesting than the art. Often it took longer to come up with it.

Given this, you would expect that all this analyzing and interpreting has reached a fair degree of complexity. And you would be correct—as long as you don't confuse complexity with subtlety and rigor. Modern art theory is a maze of neo-psychoanalysis, behaviorism, feminism, deconstructionism, post-colonialism, multi-culturalism and a thousand other mostly meaningless -isms. They are all basically agenda-isms of one sort or another, meaning that they are excuses for the writer to tie his cause to art. They allow people who are not really interested in art and have no feeling for art to talk

about politics or literature or economics or psychology or science, but to do so in a more "creative" way. In seeming to talk about art, they transcend the dryness or the straightforwardness of their own field. And besides, the field of art is so liberating: no peer review here, no bothersome facts to get in the way. The ends completely justify the means, and if the means include inconsistencies and fabrications, they can be written off as paradoxes and fantasies.

The contradiction at the heart of all this is never addressed, since to address it would be to undercut all the fun and freedom. That contradiction is that "understanding" art has absolutely nothing to do with politics or behaviorism or psychoanalysis or any other analysis or interpretation or science.

Understanding art is not like understanding why women were denied the vote, or how improper potty-training leads to neuroticism, or what happens to a single photon in the reduction of the wave packet. You do not come to understand art through analysis. You do not apply the powerful tools of the neocortex in order to box it and bag it. You do not subdue it with the Ego and explode it into tiny categories. No, you soak it up like a dream, using the infinite connectivity of the inner brain and the embrace of the Id. You do lots of non-wordable stuff, since there are no words down there, below language. It is all ultimately unanalyzable, since it is also below analysis—since analysis is a tool of the neocortex. The neocortex doesn't like to admit this: it likes to think it is the only game in town. The neocortex is a jealous scholar. But it is nonetheless a fact: the fancy tools of the neocortex, whether applied to the contents of the inner brain, or to its expression—which is art—yield next to nothing in the way of usable information. They yield only pseudo-factoids, things that have the shape of a fact but nothing inside.

Understanding art is not understanding the facticity of art—it is not understanding how it is made, or even why. Understanding art is coming to successfully feel art. You may say, hah, any fool can feel art, it takes a very smart person to unlock the secrets of art. But this is the opposite of the truth. The secret of art is the feeling. That is whole esoteric depth of it, and the analytical "secret" of art is really nothing but a dry description of commonplaces. Besides, most fools cannot feel art. In my experience, most people don't feel a goddamned thing in front of art, no matter how smart or dumb they are, since they have lost the habit of feeling in general. Especially with regard to art, the smarter they are the more likely they are to arrive in front of a work of art with unbelievable amounts of critical baggage—baggage that is less than useless. It is an absolute wall.

Trying to plumb the depths of art with the tools of analysis is like trying to plumb the depths of the ocean with an airplane. It is precisely as absurd as trying to understand Special Relativity with poetry or automatic writing or osmosis. Each mystery has its own path and its own lock. There is no general roadmap or skeleton key. This knowledge—that different powers are achieved in different ways—is itself part of esoteric knowledge. Psychoanalysis may (or may not) make one an adept at dream interpretation or the curing of bedwetters or any number of useful skills. But it will not make one a good artist or a good viewer of art, since art does not, in the end, require interpretation. It requires creation, and it requires emotional response. The creator and the responder have both partaken of the

great mystery, and come away with the treasure. The interpreter has only come away with an interpretation.

[return to 2004](#)

## Twenty-three Cups of Free Coffee

*by Miles Mathis*



Van Gogh gets a lot of press these days. And deservedly so. I wish I could send him a scrapbook. Or a few billion francs. He had such need of them once, when things were tight—on those days when he had to survive on "twenty-three cups of free coffee." But what is not generally understood is that, as bad as things were for him in the 1880's, they would be worse now. We have learned nothing from art history.

Whenever I say that the problem with art now is that non-artists are in control of it, I am always asked, "But hasn't it always been that way?" And I answer an unequivocal no. It hasn't. Artists have always had to fight, yes. Michelangelo argued with the Popes. The Impressionists argued with the Paris Salon. But they won. An artist hasn't won a battle with criticism or curators or the markets since before Picasso. Whistler was probably the last artist in history to have any success arguing with the writers and academics. That was also around 1880.

Everyone who knows Picasso's biography knows that he was famous because he lost to the critics, and lost gracefully. As he said, "I have satisfied these gentlemen and the critics... and the less they

understood the more they admired. I am only the entertainer of a public which understands its age." Art in the 20th century has been defined wholly by writers. Roger Fry, Clive Bell, Gertrude Stein, Clement Greenberg, and so on. These are the true inventors of Modernism. The artists after Picasso were too busy reading the papers to listen to the Muse. And once the analysts got control of art, art became analysis. "Art" became synonymous with "thinking about art."

It was not always like that. In fact it was never like that until a hundred years ago. Imagine Leonardo or Michelangelo, or even Rodin, being interested in "flatness" or "minimalism" or "deconstruction" or any of the various non-artistic absurdities of the 20th century. The argument that makes a single straight line on a giant canvas a work of art, or that makes a found commode one, would have been beneath contempt for these artists. They needed no verbal explanations or apologies for their art. They were not interested in intellectual quibbling: they could create art.

Arthur Danto, the current art critic for *The Nation*, said in one of his books, "Until one tries to write about it, the work [of art] remains a sort of aesthetic blur." This puts the problem into high focus. Mr. Danto's remark is symptomatic of a society that has forgotten what art is. Art is not an idea. It is an emotion. The more you can talk about it, the less it is art. Before the 20th century, art was always arrayed in mystery; criticism cannot abide mystery. Art springs from the imagination, its consorts symbol and myth. It resonates through the limbic system, surrounded by dreams. But criticism is born in the frontal lobes, circumscribed by language and reason. Great art reveals itself only to the extent that a great artist chooses to reveal it. No less, and no more. More explication can exist only at the expense of the art.

But all this is ignored. It is inexpedient. It is not properly inclusive. It does not create jobs. And an artist who complains of the presumptions of criticism is dismissed as anti-intellectual, if not ignorant. Or he is shouted down. Outnumbered in oceans of words. Drowned in a river of ink.

Today theory remains the dominant faith, the critic its high priest, "relevance" its current shibboleth. The market arrays itself around "the word." And there is far more money in art administration than there is in art. At the university, our art history departments dwarf our art departments. Which department do you think produces "art experts"? The irony is so huge it overwhelms the eyeballs and becomes invisible, like an elephant seen through a microscope.

I am told, in response, that "realism" is making a comeback. But there are two and only two markets for art in this country. There is a market for decoration and there is a market for social activism. No one would know how to look at a work that did not satisfy one of these market demands. "Realism" has split precisely along these lines. If it is pathological enough, like Lucian Freud or Odd Nerdrum, it is given an "activist" slot. It is explained politically or psychologically, as a "hammer" against the status quo or whatnot. Everything else is sold as decoration, and is completely dismissed by criticism. But Van Gogh did not paint for either of these reasons. He said, "Better a little wisdom than a lot of energetic zeal." And this:

We are in the midst of downright laissez-aller and anarchy. We artists, who love order and symmetry, isolate ourselves and are working to define only one thing.

These sentiments are completely pre-modern. Van Gogh painted exactly what he wanted to paint, with no concern for the fashions of the art market or of the needs of the critics or curators. And so he was ignored as a fool. And so he would be ignored today even more, if he were shambling around toothless somewhere in West Virginia or Western Ireland, painting irrelevant "things." Van Gogh existed on the outskirts of a dying star, the light and warmth of Rembrandt and Delacroix and Millet still warming him. Now he would have to survive on the edge of a black hole.

Ask yourself when was the last time an artist wrote or spoke of art theory? Any artist who speaks against the avant garde is assumed to be reactionary, an accomplice of Helms or Guiliani. But my heroes are Noam Chomsky and Wendell Berry and Faye Wattleton. I am working for the Green Party. Things are not as tidy as most would have them. The truth is that art cannot take direction, from the right or the left. Art is a gift of the Id, not a prescription or proscription of the Superego. That is to say, at its best, art is a private passion, not a public mission. Unless we relearn that, art will continue to be shock and spectacle rather than subtlety and depth.



## *On the Non-aesthetic Content of Art - Part I*

*by Miles Mathis*



The appropriate non-aesthetic content of art was probably the central issue of late 19th century art. No other topic caused as much division among artists. By non-aesthetic, these artists would have meant any content that was not defined by formal aspects of the art. The formal aspects of art are just things like composition, color, paint quality, line quality, and so on. To these would probably be added the inherent beauty of the model or the landscape. A painting that was concerned mainly with natural beauty (like a Constable, say, or an Albert Moore), or with color and effect (like a Monet), or with line and composition (like a Whistler), would be said to have little non-aesthetic content.

In the 20th century, this argument became *passé*. The answer was given by critics in the first half of the century, and the discussion pretty much died out. Art was expected to have either no content, aesthetic or otherwise, or it was expected to have political content. Some have said that the "no content" group was a natural progression from the aestheticists of the 19th century, like Whistler. But notice that Whistler argued against non-aesthetic content, whereas 20th century critics jettisoned aesthetic content as well. Abstract painters, backed by critics like Clement Greenberg, were disallowed subject matter—which did away with the model or the landscape—as well as any non-formal use of form. That is to say, neither composition, color or line quality were allowed to be in the service of anything but themselves,

not even beauty. A form existed only to call attention to itself, as an idea. For example, the color blue did not say, "Look at me, I am a pretty color!", it said, "Look at me, I am another color, alone in the universe, alienated, an idea without assignment, a peg in the void." Whistler wanted his forms to make you feel emotions directly. Greenberg wanted his artists to make you think deep philosophical thoughts, thoughts mainly along the lines of, "what is a line?, what is a color?, what does it mean to draw a line on a canvas?, isn't it mainly an empty gesture?, why am I in this museum?"

If you weren't asking these thrilling questions, then you should certainly be contemplating the exigencies of socio-politics. This was the other possibility of modern art. Forget that you had just come from being forced to consider those exigencies by the newspaper over your morning coffee, or by the million magazines and pamphlets on your doorstep, or by the screaming people on every corner, or by the grand gestures of Hollywood. No, we were told, the highest duty of art is to restate today's headlines in even more stentorian tones and more hysterical hand-wringing. This will make us better people. A small dose of beauty would spoil us for life, making us into little pathetic lapdogs of the current administration and the dupes of all corporations. But a quart of blood and piss squirted directly into our eyes will make us righteous and pure.

Well, some of us have come out beyond this dichotomy in the 21st century. And as we do, we may find that we return to the questions of the 19th. Specifically, should art have non-aesthetic content, and if so, what should it be? We do not ask these questions in order to force them upon others: we ask for ourselves. What should we do? What would be best to do? If we judge some art to be greater, how do we make that judgment? If we dismiss some art as bad or phony, why do we think that?

With a hundred-years hindsight, I think it is clear that both sides were right in the 19th century, and that both sides were wrong in the 20th. Art is not politics or stripped down form. But it is both aesthetic content and non-aesthetic content. It may have very little non-aesthetic content, like Whistler, or very much, like Michelangelo. The difference being that Michelangelo must also have beautiful forms, whereas Whistler need not have Michelangelo's biblical content. Aesthetic content is a requirement. Non-aesthetic content is not. If that is so, the next question becomes, what sort of non-aesthetic content is best suited to art? Is some content unsuitable? If so, on what grounds? Moral, logical, what?

This is where we hit the tough stretch, the stretch where the artists in the 19th century got drunk and threw glasses of wine at each other and sometimes drew knives. We don't do stuff like that anymore, since we are too civilized. We avoid such conversations as being impolite. Any answer would be intolerant. But if you have read any of my other articles, you know that will not stop me from typing. I simply sharpen my fingernails and let them click on the keys.

"What is wrong," I have been asked, "with morbid or gory subjects? The history of art is filled with St. Sebastians full of arrows and the lopped heads of St. John and Holophernes and Christs nailed to the cross dripping blood and various doctors opening up grisly corpses. Why can't modern artists paint corpses and blood and guts? Isn't there some kind of double standard going on here?"

It is a good question, and I think we are required to have an answer. If we find Nerdrum or Freud or Bacon more repellent than Ribera or Artemesia or Matthias Grünewald, we should say precisely why. In the case of Nerdrum, anyway, we cannot be taking exception to his aesthetic content, which most agree is of high merit. His compositions, paint quality, color, line quality: all world class. If he were painting something else, most of us would be thrilled by his technique. Some of us are thrilled by it anyway. So what is the problem? How are his paintings any worse than Goya's or Bosch's apocalyptic images? Why do we cringe and dismiss, rather than just cringe?

Perhaps it is because it is difficult to connect most of Nerdrum's subject matter to real and meaningful crises. All of the examples from history that I have chosen, and I think any that you could choose, depict what one could call universal subjects. Most are religious or mythic. Even the medical examples are universal, in that the connection of medicine to the central concerns of history is clear. But a highway accident victim seems gratuitous, as do various people defecating, one-armed people, and erect people. In some possible painting, an erection may be meaningful content, I just don't think it is with Nerdrum. Frida Kahlo often had graphic content, but it was never gratuitous. In every example I can think of it was religious or medical, and hauntingly universal. It was a blisteringly ingenuous depiction of her life and her dreamlife. With Nerdrum the dreamlife is manufactured. It simply fails to resonate.

What this tells me is that manufactured content is something to avoid, whether it is the sort of sappy sentimentalism that we have been warned against for a hundred years, or the fake grotesquery of late figuration. "Difficult" subject matter, from sharks in tanks to corpses, from deviants to roadkill, is implied to have a depth that it just doesn't have.

# *On the Non-aesthetic Content of Art - Part II*

*by Miles Mathis*



Last week I ended Part I by offering my opinion that manufactured content was something to be avoided. Manufactured content is that which does not either successfully tie into some existing mythopoetics or express some deeply felt emotion of the artist. Some might say this means that I require art to be "artless," which appears to be a bit of a contradiction. It is true, I do think the non-aesthetic content of art should be artless, in the sense that I believe that it is required to a genuine expression of the artist's feeling about the subject. Obviously, the art may be "artful" in other ways—technically, formally, etc. But painting is not acting. It is not the assumption of emotions for an effect. And even if you think that it is, I may make the argument that acting is only successful when the actor feels the emotions he is "faking." Good acting is not the invention of emotions; it is the calling up of real emotions in manufactured settings.

"What about Lucian Freud?" someone may ask. "He seems in earnest. Are you saying that an earnest pathology makes great art?" No, I am building a definition one adjective at a time. You have filled in "earnest" as my first adjective, where I might have used "authentic" or "real," but I will not quibble. With Freud, we must continue to delineate subject matter. Why is Freud more offensive than

Rembrandt or Van Gogh?—*The Potato Eaters* are not exactly charming company, after all. Van Gogh's pathology rings out on every canvas, every brushstroke. Why is he a hero and Freud a chump? It is due once again to the content. Van Gogh's pathology was different in kind than Freud's. Van Gogh's pathology concerned his inability to socialize, and his growing mental deterioration caused (in part) by that. It also concerned his inability to deal with the problems of the world, which he internalized no matter how big or small they were. But none of this shows up in his canvases. Just the opposite. His canvases are neither anti-social nor full of political complaint. They are full of bright connection to his surroundings, whether it is flowers, fruit trees, bird's nests, old shoes, or starry nights. His frazzled mental state only plays up these positive connections. If we also feel sadness, it is a sadness tied to unfulfilled expectations. That is, it is a classical melancholy, caused by looking for meaning in the world.

Freud's pathology, on the other hand, expresses itself directly through his art. It is a modern pathology, caused by an inability to love. In it everything becomes horrible and a sign of horror. Not only are cities or governments or certain people horrible—which we might accept—but even our friends and lovers are horrible. The human body is an abomination, green and scaly. Fresh young girls are painted like rotting meat, children look like trolls, animals become monsters. This is not a brave effort to paint things the way they are. It is a giant falsification in the direction of ugly, a much larger falsification than any of the idealizations of Canova or Raphael or Poussin toward beauty. Rodin's *Helmet Maker's Wife* was a true depiction of a non-idealized world. Even Baudelaire's *Flowers of Evil* was more honest than Freud, since Baudelaire balanced his corpses with fair maidens. The maidens would become corpses, *but they were not yet corpses*. They were cherished beings, to be eulogized—to be compared to the night sky and beautiful vases. He would have seen that to make a fair maiden a corpse is the same sort of fakery as putting lipstick on a body in a coffin.

You may think that my argument against Freud is a moral one, since I am implying nihilism. But I see it as a logical argument. Nihilism may be countered without any mention of religion. It may be countered with a point of the finger, with a "look, there, that is not how things are." Your models are not that ugly, Mr. Freud. That is, the very same method the progressives have used to dismiss beauty may be used to dismiss ugly. Some of the classicists were attempting to make this world into a heaven. The moderns are trying to make it into a hell. It is neither, or both. Van Gogh and Baudelaire saw it as both. Michelangelo and Goya saw it as both. Rodin and Rembrandt saw it as both. That is why they are great.

Freud is a falsifier. And he is a falsifier to no apparent end. The falsifiers who made things too heroic or beautiful or cheerful—that is, the idealists—at least had a reason. To put it in the simplest possible terms, they were giving us something to shoot for. One can understand a fantasy, one that said "wouldn't it be nice if." Progressive politics can be seen as just this sort of fantasy. Wouldn't it be nice if people were fair and honest and altruistic? Wouldn't it be nice if men and women always treated each other with kindness and proper attention? Wouldn't it be nice if governments worked? But for some reason progressive politics has aligned itself with a theory of art that destroys all fantasy, or

whose only fantasies are brutal and grotesque.

One has to finally ask, what do corpses and other grotesqueries have to do with making the world a better place? I have never understood the connection. The propagandists will answer that these pieces I am talking about are examples of what the regressive past has done to us. They are meant to shock, to make us throw up our hands and ask, "what have we done?" But for pity's sake, I ask that fifty times a day without going to avant garde exhibitions. I do not go to art to ask that question one more time. I go to art, like I might go to religion, not to ask, "what have we done?" but "what do we do now?" In fact, it is even more direct than that. I do not ask "what should be done?" I simply do it. My work is my personal answer to the question. This is what I should be doing, as an artist. Not as a political act, as a generator of some future action; but as a good and meaningful act now. That is what art should be, in my opinion. Art is the creation of an artifact that is its own argument. It does not need a theory to define it, a critic to contextualize it, or a milieu to give it meaning. A true work of art transcends "relevance." Artistically speaking, relevance is irrelevant.

The avant garde will counter that most people do not ask "what have we done?" fifty times a day. They are isolated, we are told. Alienated, misinformed, oblivious, etc. Maybe, but the people who are politically ignorant and oblivious are not the ones going to avant garde exhibits. The people watching Jerry Springer and eating twinkies by the case are not the same people waltzing into Soho galleries and sipping Perrier. The avant garde is simply annoying the choir. It is informing precisely no one. And in order to make art its mouthpiece, it has destroyed art history. In order to make art into one more cog in the propaganda machine, it has killed art's original definition. For you see that art in the last fifty years has not been a case of, "you are free to make political art, if you like." It is a case of, "you must make political art, and if you don't we will know you are a boob or a traitor."

Which brings us back to non-aesthetic content. The sort of art that fetches the highest prices, that gets into the biggest shows and galleries, that gets written up the most is still art that is defined completely by its non-aesthetic content. This non-aesthetic content is socio-politics. But, as I have shown, this content, and most other contemporary content, is logically indefensible. Political art fails as both art and politics. Shock art fails because it fails to shock, fails to inform, and fails to support a consistent theory of progression. Furthermore, it fails because in order to achieve this massive failure it supplanted a much richer history of art. On the other hand, grotesqueries and other examples of the gratuitously ugly fail to provide meaningful content in that they are not relatable to any possible mythopoetics. They mimic historical forms without tying into the myths that gave life to these forms. That is, their depth is only a phantom.

Some will say, this doesn't leave us much. We have been cut off from the past. We cannot dredge up the old mythopoetics without being accused of pastiche or kitsch. Modern life has no religion or myth or other system capable of giving sustenance to art. If political art is a dead end, or, as you say, was an oxymoron from the beginning, where do we go from here? I cannot answer that. I can only answer for myself. But it seems to me that the past never dies: it is only dormant. We were cut off from the past by

the censure of the avant garde. But if we have dismissed the avant garde as a systematic error in thinking, then that censure no longer pertains. As artists, we may take inspiration wherever we find it and ask no critic's confirmation. Remember that there was an 1800-year gap between the Greeks and the Renaissance. Michelangelo was therefore the worst sort of "regressive," looking back almost two millenia for inspiration. Any critic who wants to label me a "throwback," thereby lumping me in with Michelangelo, is free to do so. I look forward to it.

# *On Prurience in Art -Part I*

*by Miles Mathis*



This is another topic that I may speak about with some degree of intimacy, in the first person, as a primary source. Meaning that I have been accused of prurience myself, in regard to my subject matter. Therefore the discussion that follows will not be an objective analysis of someone else's creations; it will be the exposition of a subject that I am materially involved in. As I interrogate and defend other artists, I will also interrogate and defend myself. Some will say this must taint my evidence. I reply that you must remember that all evidence is tainted, but artistic evidence tainted by an artist is bound to be more interesting and informative than artistic evidence tainted by a critic. I may be biased, that is, but at least I know what I am talking about.

One of the most revealing (and uncommented on) ironies of contemporary criticism is that writers on both sides of the central argument are attacking each other in the same basic terms. That is to say that the avant garde is often seen dismissing realism for the same reason that realism dismisses the avant garde. Realists attack the avant garde for having prurient interests. You can all imagine the form of these attacks without my recapitulation. But the avant garde is attacking realism in precisely the same way. Of course the avant garde does not attack living realists by name—the avant garde prefers to maintain the fiction that realism is dead—naming living artist would only be giving them free press. Therefore all attacks on realism must be indirect. The avant garde attacks realism by continuing to



strafe 19th century art, in the way they have been doing for a hundred years. And one of the main concentrations of fire continues to be the prurience of 19th century subject matter. Bouguereau's little peasant girls, Waterhouse's teenage nymphs, Gerome's naked slaves, and so on. It is most curious to see the same critic defend Lucian Freud one week for his honesty, and attack Waterhouse the next for his perversity.

But again, from the point of view of the artist, both sides are wrong. They each approach art with a philosophical or theoretical lens that cannot focus any work of art, classical or modern. They end up failing utterly to see why any work succeeds or fails. The sort of sexual squeamishness that allows a viewer to dismiss a painting simply due to a patch of pubic hair or an exposed breast need not be commented on here, in a paper claiming to be concerned with philosophy (although such squeamishness remains epidemic). No, the matter goes deeper than that, and ends only by looking at the whole relation of art and philosophy. The realists and moderns, despite different visual inspiration, have attacked each other in the same terms because they have accepted the same preconditions of argumentation. That is, they disagree about art but agree about philosophy. They both believe in the primacy of analysis and the word, the centrality of science, and the superiority of reason. Not only that, but they also agree on the basic inferiority of the body. This agreement is not always based on a common Christian past, as you might think. The inferiority of the body is a universal religious constant, promulgated by Buddhists, Muslims, and Christians alike. Nor are atheists likely to veer from it. A scientific rejection of any sort of deism has not returned science to a Greek appreciation of the physical. In the spinning out of Descartes' mind-body dualism, the moderns have chosen mind (even as they turn the mind into a machine).

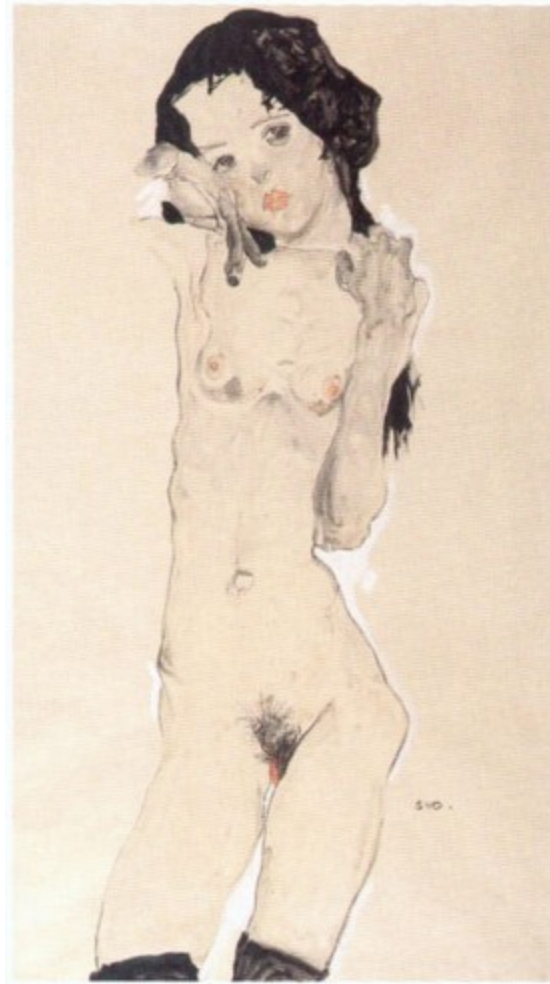
What is not understood is that art and artists have always stood in opposition to this entire historical progression. None of us, from Praxiteles to Munch (and beyond), have accepted the primacy of analysis, of reason, of science, or of philosophy. Even those of us who were also scientists or philosophers (like Leonardo or Joseph Wright of Derby) would not have apologized for an obsession with the physical. Once upon a time, this is what "physics" meant. A sort of obsession with the physical that was not so very far from art. Leonardo did not have to walk many steps across his studio, or across his mind, to go from artist to scientist. But there is no creature in history less artistic than the modern physicist (despite the claims from him to the contrary). The physicist now seems to believe that creating paradoxes is creative, but the fact is that modern science is so far beyond an obsession with the physical that it isn't even believed to exist. Quantum Mechanics did away with "reality" many decades ago, and now even the moon is believed to be a probability (I am not kidding). It is very difficult to be in love with a probability, or to fall in love under a probability, or to paint by the light of a probability.

An artist, whether also physicist or not, is in love with the physical world. As such a lover, he is at odds with almost the entire spectrum of contemporary thinkers. Art splits the horns of all modern arguments. It does not respond to analysis from the right or the left, as I have said before. It also does not reveal itself to science or to religion or to philosophy. It reveals itself to desire and emotion. This is where prurience comes back into the argument. Both realists and the avant garde see prurience as a pejorative

term, at least as regards the enemy's art. It is a term of abuse. The great artists have never seen it in this light. For them the term was only a twisting of a more positive adjective. What the writer saw as a perverted interest, the artist saw only as an interest. The word "prurience" therefore became strictly equivalent to the word "sexual" used by someone who was not sexual but desired to be. In this way, it became a red flag to artists, a signal of who they were dealing with. That is why the term dropped out of use in the early 20th century: critics realized it said more about them than about the artists, and they moved on to other less revealing topics. But by the late 20th century there were so few artists left, by the old definition, that the red flag was no longer a flag. There was nobody to tip off. All of art had become one writer talking to another writer. These writers all had the same neuroses, invisible to themselves, and so they were free to be as transparent as they wanted. This is how we have come to the absurd pass we are at, where critics weaned on unbelievable brutality and pathology in art turn around and accuse the Victorians of being perverts. Perversion is apparently allowed only if a living entity can profit from it. Once a work is beyond the open market it reverts to being a potential pattern for old ladies' knitting clubs or an illustration for vacation Bible school.

# *On Prurience in Art - Part II*

*by Miles Mathis*



The problem with contemporary art, realist and modern, is not prurience but it's opposite: alienation. Both sides have conspired in this alienation. The methods of modernism are well known, but there has been no opposition from the other side. Walter Benjamin, hardly a 20th century progressive, recommended the assumption of "critical distance," and his writings have influenced many. So contemporary realists come from a school that is hardly less "critical" than the avant garde. Philosophy and criticism have moved all of art, both avant garde and "kitsch," into ever greater realms of analysis. In the avant garde it has become self analysis; in realism it has most often become analysis of technique.

Both are far-removed from any accusation of prurience and voyeurism, seems to me. Voyeurism, as an interest in the "other", would actually be a sort of tonic to either brand of alienation. Voyeurism (a species of prurience, no doubt) can be pathological, of course, if it stops short of contact. But it is difficult for an artist to look at a model without contacting her first. Art has always been voyeuristic—it is necessarily so. Modern art is less voyeuristic than Victorian art or Renaissance art, but not, I would argue, to its benefit. It might easily be shown that voyeurism is precisely the thing that kept art

from slipping into solipsism for so long. In the early 20th century, art finally fell headfirst into the deepest of solipsistic pits. It has still not climbed halfway out. Politics has been used since mid-century to redirect the artist's gaze outward, but it has only partially succeeded in resocializing him, or anybody else. Politics may create general connections, but it cannot create human connections like a direct interest in the body always did. That is to say, the right sort of politics may make you love your "neighbor" (as an abstraction); but only a sexual interest will get you a date with the girl next door.

We are now less prurient as artists than artists have ever been (yes, there is a tear in my eye.) The avant garde is the least sexy bunch ever to make the world stage. Vulgar and exhibitionistic, yes. But hardly ever about sex. Sex as a pathology sometimes rears its head, among all the other pathologies on view, but sex as sex is pretty much unknown in contemporary art. Love as love, not at all. So we are privy to bleeding traffic victims and hacked up war casualties, but not to the artist's lover, painted with tenderness or emotion. In the last instance we might be subjected to some hidden level of misogyny or "phalludation" or other residue of the patriarchy. How could we ever forgive ourselves if our daughters came to think that men were looking at them? Best turn all the "dirty old men" into propagandists for some -ism or another. Or better yet, give art entirely over to the post-structural women and other politically inebriated sub-groups who would never think of looking at anyone with desire.

Furthermore, some will say that an acceptance of voyeurism can only lead to a degraded art. They fear an explosion of outright pornography within realism itself. I am not sure this fear is unjustified, but its likelihood is based more on exhibitionism than voyeurism. Voyeurism and exhibitionism are commonly thought to be the complements of one another. But they are complements only in the cultural context that exhibitionism is rare. If exhibitionism becomes the norm, then voyeurism is extinct. The joy of looking is overthrown by having everything in full view at all times. You cannot sneak a gratifying peek at something that is being thrown in your face.

Beyond that, there are clearly different levels of voyeurism—different people looking, different ways of looking, different subjects treated in different ways. A man staring at the *David* and a man staring at a porn site are both staring. They are both agape and agog, and not always for entirely different reasons. Still, it is best to differentiate the two. Art supplies its own context and rules, where a porn site does not. The only rule in porn is that anything goes. But nudity, even prurience, in art is always tied to one mythopoetics or another. With the *David*, the mythopoetics is obviously biblical, and so one cannot possibly look at that sculpture in the same way one might look at a pornsite. Even non-Christians cannot do so, since the entire work depends on a view of the nude that is modest and indirect. The genitals are downplayed and stylized, for instance. The gaze is averted: David looks away. He is busy with something else. And so on. This applies to all art nudes, worthy of the name. Manet's *Olympia* is not the depiction of a sexual free-for-all, despite its depiction of a courtesan. She is actually very cool and detached, hardly sexy at all. Munch's *Puberty* is likewise almost wholly un-lascivious, since what is so successfully painted is not a budding sexuality, but an incipient crisis.

All art is voyeuristic in that it must be concerned first and foremost with its subject. Despite what we have been told by the critics, art is not primarily about materials or forms or politics. It is about a subject and the artist's connection to it. It is a lack of subtlety or depth in consideration of subject that leads to baubles or illustration, not the consideration of subject itself. If you say, no, Michelangelo wasn't interested in the biblical David, he was interested in creating a great sculpture, which is mostly a

formal consideration; I say I believe he was mainly interested in capturing the beauty of that particular young man who he found to model for him, which is even more a direct interest in subject than the biblical one. If you argue that is a prurient, low interest which cannot lead to great art, I point to the sculpture itself. It did, so it must be able to. He chose the right young man to be obsessed with, and the model's grace and beauty had its own ineffable depth and subtlety, which the artist only needed to see and find and capture. If he had chosen a different type of model, the sculpture could not have succeeded, even infused with Michelangelo's genius. The same is true with Jesus, in the *Pieta*. Force Michelangelo to work with an inferior model and you have made the *Pieta* impossible. Subject, and even more mundanely, choice of model, propel all figurative work and always will. That is where the primary obsession begins and must begin. If the artist feels nothing for or about his model then neither will we. Look at Rodin, sleeping with everyone, to the benefit of his art. Perhaps we should *require* artists to sleep with everyone they paint or sculpt: then we might get some real emotion in art again. It is not prurience or voyeurism that is a problem in contemporary art. It is a lack of real emotion that is causing art, both realist and modern, to be so uninspired and unmemorable. Art may not require prurience, but it requires a full attraction to the world, and especially a personal and intimate attraction to the subject at hand.

# *The Beginnings of Modernism - Part 1*

*by Miles Mathis*



*Reader, I think proper, before we proceed any farther together, to acquaint thee that I intend to digress through this whole history as often as I see occasion; of which I am myself a better judge than any pitiful critic whatever, and here I must desire all those critics to mind their own business, and not to intermeddle with affairs or works which no way concern them; for till they produce the authority by which they are constituted judges, I shall not plead to their jurisdiction.*

*Henry Fielding*

Since I consider myself a child of Whistler in counter-criticism, I am going to return historically to where he left off: Europe around the turn of the century. He kept *his* critics in check, and if he had had any help from his immediate successors we might not find ourselves in the mess we are in.

There was a coincidence at the end of the nineteenth century of artistic unrest, which was mostly merited, and critical presumptuousness, which was not. The inventiveness of people like Courbet, Whistler, Manet, Van Gogh, and Gauguin might justly have been seen as a proper tonic to an over-academicized milieu. But of course the critics misinterpreted all of them as replacements for art history and tradition instead of additions to it. The critics saw every novelty not as an enrichment, a widening, of artistic sensibility and achievement, but as a redefinition of art and a dismissal of all previous art. In part the artists were also to blame. There have always been artists, overexcited by their own achievements, who have wanted to claim that they have reinvented art. But no one ever took them

seriously before; it was all *braggadoccio*, and everybody knew it. The Modern critic was the first person in history to take this claim seriously. Why? Because the critics needed a new art every few years—only an art that is constantly in flux needs the administration of a critical overseer. A hundred or a thousand artists all claiming to be the originator and *ne plus ultra* of art opens the door to the "purveyors of analysis" who will weigh all the claims and pronounce judgment.

It is this kind of thinking that leads to a career like that of Picasso, who was forced to redefine art every five or ten years or risk oblivion. Quality is no longer the issue: critical acclaim, i.e. *fame*, is. Picasso is famous because he was able to come up with something really novel everytime he needed to: he played the game perfectly and stayed always one step ahead of the *passe*. He is like Liz Taylor, keeping her name in the papers no matter what it takes—it may start out with something tangible like beauty or grace or fine acting, but it ends with divorce number seven, face lift number five, or perfume number three. It doesn't matter as long as one remains interesting, as long as "they remember who you are." It may start out with a Blue or Rose period, but it ends with pointless collages, scrap art, and scribbled line drawings and throwaway doodles with big, super-recognizable signatures.

As an example of the destructive critical attitude that underlies such waste, let us go back to Cezanne and his apotheosis by the critics in the 1890's and early 1900's. In H.W. Janson's *History of Art*, there are side by side reproductions of Cezanne's copy of *Christ in Limbo*, and the original by Sebastiano del Piombo. Sebastiano and the other Renaissance masters believed that line quality, paint quality, richness of color—in short, the finish of the piece—were important artistic considerations. But Clive Bell, Roger Fry, and many other important critics argued that Cezanne's abstraction brings the formal qualities, the primary aesthetic qualities, to the forefront. For them Sebastiano's finish and his dexterity are distractions. These "surface" qualities not only fail to complete or to synthesize the formal qualities, they overshadow or usurp them. For Clive Bell, especially, Cezanne's painting was a great advance because its forms are not simply a "means of suggesting emotions," they are actually "objects of emotion." For Bell, this formal quality defines painting—there can be no art without it. Cezanne is not simply *interesting* because his abstraction clarifies the role of form in visual art; he is, for Bell, *better* than Sebastiano. He supercedes Sebastiano and *makes him obsolete* because abstraction is, in fact, *purification*. For Bell, Renaissance art becomes the outmoded muddleheadedness of semi-barbarians whose surface effects are only pagan seductions or Christian ornamentation.

But Bell errs in thinking form the only defining quality of painting. It is necessary, but hardly sufficient. It is easy to show that Sebastiano's line, color, composition, surface treatment, and content are all aesthetically "significant." Bell never proves that unabstracted art is *necessarily* insignificant, or that the surface qualities of Titian or Raphael or Sebastiano, for example, are *only* "accretions." Without this proof the "purification" of a Cezanne is only a simplification, and must be judged as such.

Furthermore, Bell does not realize how much Cezanne relies on the whole visual system created by Renaissance painters. Even with Cezanne's abstraction there is more left than lost. Most importantly, Cezanne is still painting *objects*. Somehow, Cezanne's fruit remains terribly seductive for us. As long

as we recognize the object, the fruit, it will seduce us as both fruit and form, *just as it does in real life*. Cezanne accentuates the form, brings it forward, without obliterating the fruit, and makes us taste the fruit, as it were, without first recognizing everything about it. We are attracted to the fruit through its form rather than through the totality of its characteristics. In simplifying in this way, he reminds us of something we already know, but forget in the rush to eat, to consume, the world: the world is beautiful, and we consume it, we are attracted to its consumption, *because* it is beautiful. Cezanne's abstraction distances us from the fruit enough to see beyond our hunger to the *cause* of our hunger. A real pear becomes, in the routine of life, inseparable from our desire for it. Our sight of it and our hunger for it are simultaneous. A painted pear, an abstracted pear, breaks down the immediacy of this recognition, and our hunger is held off for a moment as we admire the pear as form, as beauty. We are not only attracted to it, for a moment we understand why we are attracted to it, and this understanding gives us pleasure.

Are we attracted to the fruit or to the form? If to the fruit, Bell would call us philistines. For *as fruit*, it is still terribly impure: it is only a physical thing, having no spiritual or ideational content. I would call us human. The fruit and the form are inseparable. If Cezanne's pears did not appeal to our hunger, their form would not appeal to our sense of beauty. To deny this connection is to deny the physical with a Victorian squeamishness that Bell, I am sure, believed he was above and beyond. Fruit, as fruit, is an impurity, just as sex, as sex, is an impurity. But trying to appreciate a Cezanne pear only as form is like trying to have sex in the dark, only for procreation. Cezanne's abstraction is successful because it manages to accentuate the fruit, the object, not obliterate it. It clarifies without destroying. Amplification through simplification. In this way Cezanne's accomplishment is not so novel: this was the theory of Velasquez, Hals, Sargent, and Rodin, among many, many others. Why is Cezanne the father of abstraction instead of, say, Velasquez? There were no critics in the court of Philip.



# *The Beginnings of Modernism - Part 2*

*by Miles Mathis*



Perhaps Cezanne simplified the object as far as it could be simplified. In object painting, Cezanne abstracted as far as he could. Beyond this was only a sort of idealism: the attempt to paint ideas rather than objects. But, as Emile Zola said, "Oh, for pity's sake, no painting of the soul. What is more tiresome than the depiction of ideas. That an artist place a thought inside a head, yes! but that the head be there solidly painted and in such a way that it will defy the passage of centuries." If the purifications of Modernism have proven anything, it is that form, abstracted completely from any visual system, cannot communicate anything, much less the aesthetically significant emotions Bell is so fond of. Calling up aesthetic emotions visually without any visually recognizable symbols, or objects, becomes like trying to call up sexual emotions in a man without recourse to woman, or the idea of woman. People respond aesthetically to art because they respond aesthetically to the world; formal qualities—line, color, etc.—exist in both places, and art's attempt to set up its own stimulus/response pattern

exclusive of the world cannot succeed. To try to separate, as Bell does, the aesthetic emotion from other emotions—sexual, among others—*may* succeed, to a certain degree, but it will not enrich either life or art. It will leave both dessicated and hopeless. A man may be able to completely separate his aesthetic appreciation for a woman's "significant form" from his desire for her, but his art and his love will both suffer.

In addition, Bell's belittling of form as only a "means of suggesting emotion" in some paintings, as opposed to being an "object of emotion" in abstracted paintings, overly limits the purview of art. Bell calls the former "descriptive," and dismisses them as being illustration, not art. Before I object, let me give an example of what I think he means. There are two ways to call up the emotions as they are revealed when confronted with, say, death, or the idea of death: one may create a scene of someone dying, such as Rubens' *Christ on the Cross*; or one may paint a yawning black circle in a white field, as Rothko has done. For Bell, only the latter uses form as an "object of emotion" and can be called art. All "descriptive" painting, no matter how good, is less than art (and is made obsolete by photojournalism anyway, we are told).

I find that Bell's definitions help very little, though. He never gets to the crux of the problem. What does it mean for an abstraction to be "an object of emotion"? I can't say and neither can he. And even if Cezanne's or Rothko's abstractions *are* objects of emotion, does this status really give them precedence over the "suggesting of emotion"? Is the emotional experience so much richer that it bumps all previous art into a lower category? Of course not. A completely abstract painting that acts as an object of emotion must do so as a symbol. The color or shape of the abstraction must call up some emotion in a symbolic way—that is, by suggesting something else. But art as pure symbol, or pure abstraction, can be terribly limiting because it requires using symbols that are clearly recognizable, or educating the viewer on the artist's use of symbols. Clear and distinct symbols are not easy to come by, and any symbolism that has to be explained undercuts the whole artistic process. In addition, symbolic art excels non-symbolic art only in the treatment of ideas that cannot be "described". "Death," for instance, allows for no descriptive treatment (except perhaps personification, which is also really symbolism rather than description). "A person dying" and "death" are not really the same thing. But to substitute a symbol, or an abstraction, for an object like a human being or a pear, that *can* be described, is not an improvement. I have never seen an abstracted human figure, or a symbol of a figure, that was as human as one of Michelangelo's *descriptions*. I have never seen a pear abstracted further than a Cezanne pear that kept its "peariness". And if an artist wants to suggest a human emotion, such as sadness, how is it possible to do this without recourse to a sad human face or a sad human situation? If "sadness" can be abstracted or symbolized at all, it can be only with some measurable loss of immediacy. Disconnection from the "real" world, the "descriptive" world, through abstraction or symbolism, cannot be more effective as regards the expression of most psychological states because these states are tied to the world and are meaningless without it. Of course, the idea of "death" is one very important exception. Death *is* this disconnection from the real world, or at least it is thought or feared to be. The abstracted idea of death may therefore be expressed by an abstraction. But does the success of this abstraction supercede the success of description, as Bell claims? I don't think so. For where Modernism sometimes gains, it also loses. Abstraction cannot tie the idea of death

to specific human emotions. But a descriptive treatment of death can express sadness or fear or joy or expectation, depending on the subject and the artist's desire. It can tie a viewer's emotion to the described world, which is understood to be the real world. Ruben's *Christ on the Cross*, as a description of death, ties you not only to death but to all the emotions of Christ's death, both Christ's emotions and the emotions of Christians. An abstract treatment of death can only separate the viewer from the world of emotions. Bell's claim that abstracted form is an "object of emotion" is true only when that emotion is understood to be the bliss of oneness with Being, or whatever you want to call it in your own terminology. To some this blissful state is the object of life, the only true "emotion". To others it is the negation of emotion, the negation of life. To some, Rothko's painting, as a symbol of the totality of life, light and dark, is an example of the highest art. For others, descriptive painting that expresses in one form or another the specific allures of the light and the dark, their worldly emanations and the human responses to them, is more interesting.

For me, life demands the latter response: elevating abstraction at the expense of realism, as Bell wants to do, is tantamount to encouraging a blissful immobility of the Eastern type. Sleep, meditation, or staring at a Rothko painting may be restful, but an obsession with *remaining* in this Zenlike state is to be avoided, I think. Abstraction is a viable art, certainly, but it is not the only art any more than yoga is the only exercise or alpha is the only brain wave. Besides, if I am right and abstraction is not an "object of emotion" but, as in Rothko, an object of *unemotion*—a separation from the worldly—Bell cannot argue the precedence of abstraction without falling into a *reductio ad absurdum*. He cannot logically desire the perfection of his theory. Pure or complete abstraction (as opposed to Cezanne's very partial abstraction, which still remains charmingly worldly) implies complete disconnection from the world. And everyone knows that Yogis and other Eastern adepts do not create art. Nor would Plato, obsessed with his "forms", allow art in his *Republic*. As the twentieth century has proven, the argument for abstraction has been the argument not for the perfection of art, but for the perfection of no-art.

All descriptive art relies on abstraction, in a sense *contains* abstraction, or is grounded by it. The reverse is not true. There may be abstract art that contains no description. But this purity is not in itself an argument for the superiority of abstraction. The limits of descriptive art like that of Michelangelo damn it no more than do the limits of symbolism damn the art of Rothko. In constructing his terribly limiting definitions, Bell is too obviously clearing the way for new art at the expense of old art, regardless of quality. But art is defined not by any one abstracted quality alone, not by whether the emotion involved has been "suggested" by description or "objectified" by abstraction. It is defined by the *quality* of the emotion and the *quality* of its expression. How rare, beautiful, or enlightening is the emotion, how honestly inspired in the artist's psyche? How masterful is the artist in expressing the emotion through his craft? These are the questions that matter, that will always matter.

Even if one accepts the primary importance of formal qualities in art, surely it is possible to imagine a painting that had the successful *form* of a Cezanne but also the finish and technical virtuosity he lacks (in the same way that Sebastiano's *Christ in Limbo* has these qualities beyond Cezanne's

abstraction of it). The question is, why should one quality *necessarily* negate the other. *Does* Sebastiano's finish usurp his forms? *Must* it? There is no doubt that some artists' overconcern with finish, and neglect of formal qualities, leaves their work unappealing despite its great dexterity. But given that some artists have been masters of both, why, in that case, would we prefer an abstraction? Why should Sebastiano's emotional line, his subtle coloring, his graceful composition detract from his emotional *form* rather than accentuate, or define, it? Why should we accept the Modern critic's assertion that Modernism "goes beyond" Classicism, when any logical analysis can show that it hardly approaches it. Modern art *abstracts* from Classic art, meaning it focuses on one problem and ignores all the others. It subtracts and simplifies. Cezanne, for instance, focuses on the form—the relation of *areas* of color to each other. He abstracts this quality from the totality of painting (as the Sebastiano copy makes clear) and leaves the rest. I am not going to deny his success at this, but I *am* going to question whether this is an advance that makes all previous art obsolete. Even Bell demands that art is "significant form," that is "lines and colours combined in a particular way." But whereas Cezanne's *forms* are always significant, and his colors usually are, his *lines* never are. His paintings have no linear quality at all.

I am not trying to critique Cezanne here: the paintings are not *meant* to have any linear quality. I am criticizing the critics who have wanted to elevate Cezanne, and the continuing abstraction of and subtraction from painting, at the expense of the Old Masters. I can find no good reason, either in the explanations of the critics or in the paintings of the Moderns, for preferring abstracted form (or color, or line) when I can have form *and* color *and* line *and* subject matter *and* idea *and* composition all in the same painting. I can't convince myself that artistic poverty is preferable to artistic wealth based simply on its "purity." It reminds me of Leonardo's quote: "There is hardly anyone so stupid that he would fail if he applied himself earnestly to one thing, practicing continually." And the whole argument about purity is misplaced from the beginning. Undoubtedly death is a purer state than life, but that by itself is hardly reason to prefer it.

I believe the explanation for the critics' preference for abstraction lies simply in their lack of ability to comprehend an artistic whole on the level of the Old Masters. They require the simplifications of abstraction, because they really cannot see the "significant form" in a painting until that is all there is left in it, and it has been circled and highlighted and put in letters ten feet tall. They are the type, no doubt, that is confused by subplots in novels and counterpoint in music. In their pathetic attacks on Classicism and their deification of the partialities and simplifications of Modernism, I can't help but see the reaction of those overwhelmed by an experience and a talent altogether too large for them. When Bell or Greenberg complains about Classical art's "lack of purity," I can't help but hear them saying in their hearts of hearts, "Stop oppressing us with your multiplicity of talents. We can only envy such prodigality. Give us someone we can relate to. Give us the limitations of a struggler like Cezanne. Or, even better, the incapacities of a complete phony like Barnett Newman. Who could be oppressed by *that*?"

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## The Ten Biggest Phonies Living Today

*by Miles Mathis*



*by Jasper Johns*

Stain not our pure vales with thy guilty blood! —*Byron*

When I am busy painting or sculpting I haven't always the time to devote to this column that I would like. In those cases I know I can count on *ARTnews* or one of the other not-so-cheapsheets to come up with my material for me. All I need to do is read a headline, look at a couple of silly pictures: my inspiration is upon me and before you can say "art is dead" my column is finished, edited by the Muses as I go.

Meaning that this week's title came from changing a few words in *ARTnews*' cover article [May 2004] "The Ten Most Expensive Living Artists." That article is part of a Special Money Issue—which seems redundant in that every issue of *ARTnews* is a money issue. If the artists profiled weren't obscenely rich there would be no reason to profile them. For years the ads in all the avant garde magazines had only the name of the artist and the name of the gallery—no picture of the work was necessary since the work was superfluous. It could be anything or nothing, and usually was. We now see more ads with photos,

but I tend to think the old way was more consistent as theory and more sensible as advertising—although the new ads do continue to prove that the work is superfluous.

But a Special Money Issue is obviously a giveaway to the senses and sensibilities of the editors and readers of the magazine... so much so that I am going to pass it by as OLDnews. If these poor people want to bare their shrivelled souls every month, why should I continue to throw water upon them, hoping they will grow? They must feel, as Jane Austen said, "For what do we live, but to make sport for our neighbours?" And such fine and cunning sport they do make for those of us with both eyes and souls unshrivelled.

Before I begin shooting in earnest however, I would like to answer a few pacifistic allies who have complained of my tone. They feel that art is the highroad, argumentation the lowroad. Any response is therefore stooping to the level of the enemy. In answer, I can only say that my view of warfare is just as unmodern as my view of art. My preferred analogy is the Cheyenne brave, who knows that the most efficient short-term method in warfare is an arrow to the neck. But the most generous, the most satisfying, and at the same time the most awe-inspiring method is "taking coup". That is, riding past the misaimed arrows of the enemy to strike him lightly with a curved stick, showing him his inferiority at shooting, and your superiority at bravery, horsemanship, and luck. If he has a speck of intelligence he will see that any future skirmish would be fatal, and he and his fellows will slink off to the nearest dark cave. Not only that, but they will tell the others they meet of your prowess, and you will likely never have to fight again. That is efficiency in the long term. Counter-criticism is taking coup.

Now back to the Biggest Phonies. Jasper Johns wins the top prize—40 million for *Gray Numbers*, stencilled numbers painted gray and brown. An absolutely pointless work that no one could possibly find interesting in itself. You could listen to a long-winded explanation of how it ties into modern theory, but if you did I would have to touch you with my curved stick and send you to the cave. There you would find the owner of the work, David Geffen, whom you might fear would tell you the same long story. But he wouldn't. No, he is at least clever enough to know how boring that story is. He would tell you a very short story about how much the gray numbers cost, and how he could afford it, so no big deal, and hey you look nice today, have been working out, would you like to be in a movie? In the cave would also be Jasper himself, and he and David would call upon you to officiate in their Indian leg-wrestling contest to decide who got the most phony glory for *Gray Numbers*.



Bruce Nauman also gets his picture in the magazine again for doing nothing. He is at or near number 2, although I never would have guessed it. This time he is on a horse with a lasso (I assume it is a real horse—it may be a prop). He is clearly at pains to give the impression that he is on some vast



expensive/expansive Montana ranch, abutting the ranch of Harrison Ford perhaps, where he and Han Solo will rustle up some dogies before rushing back to the tent for a can of beans and a quick masterpiece or two. His work *Henry Moore Bound to Fail* appears to be a rubber mold of a long-sleeve shirt with a rope around it, painted orange. Do not ask what in tarnation this has to do with Henry Moore, since that might imply you cared. Also do not ask how it can be worth 10 million to anyone, or you may be told that the rope is really a lasso, and can't you see the multiple meanings, and so on and on.



Robert Rauschenberg makes the list, of course, for *Factum II*. It is a collage of three or four old photographs, a calendar, some stencilling and some white paint, which MOMA paid 12 million for. Bob was clearly trying to create a greater creative abyss, a painting even more devoid of any last trace of skill, intent, content, meaning, or value, than Johns' *Gray Numbers*. I would have to call it a tie.

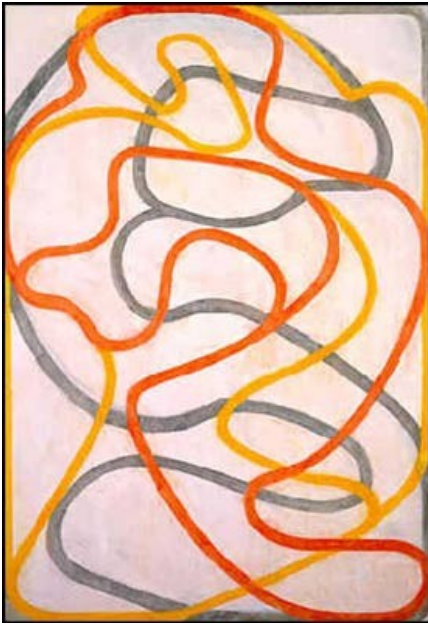


Jeff Koons appears courtesy *Michael Jackson and Bubbles*, his most famous and expensive work (5.6 million). It is a gold and white, high-detail statuette of MJ and his monkey. The awfulness of the work is supreme, and I feel like sending someone a bill for 5.6 million for subjecting my eyes to it. I am truly amazed that artists like Koons can allow themselves to be seen in public, much less have their picture taken as proof to the gods. I seriously recommend lightning insurance.



Then of course we have Lucian Freud and one of his grisly monstrosities—it reminds me of Sargent's joke title for a little watercolor: *Troglodites of the Cordilleras*. If Freud hadn't become one of the ten biggest phonies he might have done some useful work on the sets of *Dawn of the Dead* and all the sequels.





Brice Marden painted some squiggles and got famous, no one understands how, and so did Cy Twombly—although Cy forgot to lay his canvas on the ground like Pollock taught the squiggly guys, so we get those delicious drips, full of latent meaning and longing and whatnot. Frank Stella painted something—no one knows what it is, but it is titled *Bethlehem's Hospital* so it must be full of deep religious intent.



The latest member of the 10 million club and the biggest phony club is Gerhard Richter, who painted *Der Kongress*. It looks very much like a Munich 10th grader's bad copy of a *Der Spiegel* photo. Except that the 10th grader would probably have hit on a more interesting photo to copy, and might have kept the projector still while he was pencilling it in.



Others who missed the top-ten by a hair: Chuck Close, Claes Oldenburg, Anselm Kiefer, and our-cherished-enemy David Hockney. Soon-to-be contenders: Jenny Saville and John Currin. "Market experts" predict that Currin—now that he is with Gagosian Gallery—will soon see 7 figures, perhaps even for new work.

I have been trying to come up with an historical analogy. Something along the lines of, Someday the 20th century avant garde will take its places with the other historical mysteries and tragedies, the massive frauds, the intellectual fakes, the various societal illnesses, such as.... But I could come up with nothing. Not the Aztecs, not Alcibiades being called back from Sicily, not the Crusades, not the Hundred Years War. Never have people, as individuals or as governments, spent so much money for so little—literally billions of dollars for absolutely nothing—and not even attempted to justify it with religious or political conviction on a very large scale. The only thing that comes close is the money wasted by 20th century governments on the military, but even there the analogy fails to hold, no matter your political opinion. That is, the US and USSR may or may not have needed all those planes and bombs and ships, but at least the planes flew and the ships floated and the bombs ignited. But a painting by Johns or Rauschenburg was grounded from the beginning. It had the explosive potential of a squib. And it was lauded precisely for this reason. It was meant to be nothing, to exude nothingness, to cause nothing, to do nothing, to stand for nothing. Any modern work's theoretical brilliance was in its artistic nullity, from Duchamp's commode, to Warhol's Brillo Box, to Lichtenstein's cartoons to Richter's photocopies. The critics have confirmed this. The clients and museums have signalled their complicity and approbation. The buyer desired to be given a false bill of goods. And no one required justification from the gods or from any other great overriding principles. The avant garde may play with political theorizing, but David Geffen's purchase of Gray Numbers cannot be justified by any religious or political argument. He bought it solely because it was expensive and everybody knows that.

Never before has nothing passed for something for so long. People have been duped religiously and politically and financially, in ways that certainly surpass the avant garde in historical importance. But never in history has a worldwide heist taken place in full public view, with a thumb's up from the

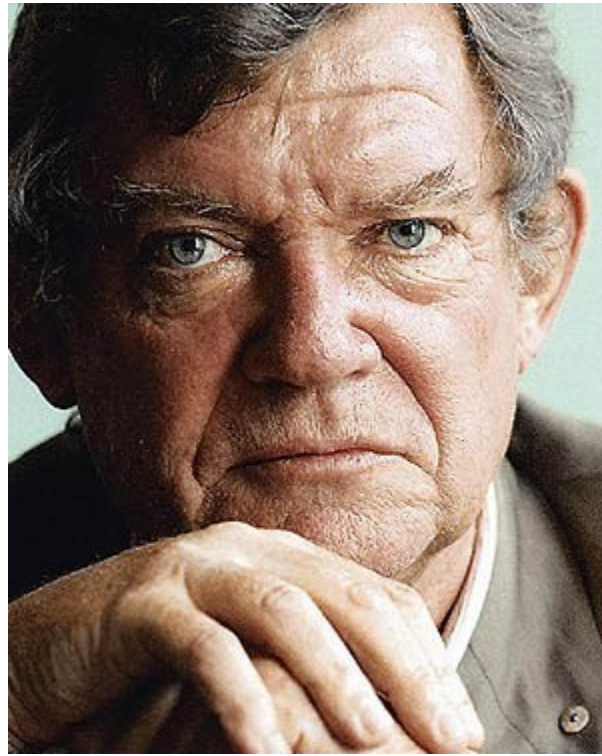
victim, and continued decade after decade after decade. It would be like Enron investors asking that the scandal become permanent, since it got their names in the papers. If the failing companies only defrauded the richest investors, and promised them their pictures in *Vanity Fair* and *ARTnews* for it, we might make Wall Street fraud a permanent legal business. After all, the superrich can afford rigged stock losses just as easily as losses at Sotheby's and Christie's, as long as we give them an equivalent eclat. If it were only paying the right consultants to think for it, Worldcom could begin offering a framed "certificate of loss" to hang in the foyer. Then, instead of pointing to *Gray Numbers*, David Geffen could point to his framed certificate of loss. It would carry the same ability to impress the same people. They would say to themselves, "David Geffen, very rich guy and moron. Now, I too want to be where morons can make a lot of money, so let's go to David's house and be David's friend." Voila, David gets what he paid for and the end is the same.

And this, you see, is why my curved stick cannot touch David Geffen, or his friends, or the artists he admires. They are all beyond embarrassment. They do not recognize superior bravery or horsemanship or even luck. They prefer life in the cave, where no one does anything at all extraordinary—except sometimes make a lot of money. It is not Atlas that has shrugged, as in Ayn Rand's tale. It is the Nibelungs, Wagner's dwarfs, who have shrugged. They have freed themselves of the tyranny of quality, of the heroics of Siegfried, of the judgment of Wotan, of the works of true artists. They have moved, like Rand's supermen, into a mythical place of their own, they have settled a land far distant from any comparison with real achievement, and, again like Rand's heroes, they have erected the dollar sign at the gate. And in so doing they have not only overturned the hierarchies of the past, they have redefined the "progression" of history. All the class struggles of previous centuries have only empowered the Geffens and Rauschenbergs and Currins, and we might hear, had we the ears for it, the cry "Morons of the world, unite!" Michelangelo himself could return to hurl thunderbolts at them, but they would be beyond his reach. His dissatisfaction would touch them not at all. Their circle is closed. They have what they want. They have money and fame. They do not want, and cannot see, bravery or horsemanship or fine art.

You may ask why I continue to attack them. Why tilt at the silent windmill? Why chastise the Nibelungs for being dwarfs? My words will not make them into heroes, my coup will not unshrive their tiny souls. I attack because their world is not yet the whole world. The dollar sign is not yet upon the gate that I call home, and I would keep their parties off my lawn. Besides, there are some in the ranks who still recognize superior horsemanship, and who understand even the virtue of luck—for luck is the sign of the hand of the Muse. I would ride into the thickest hail of arrows, were no one left watching but the Muse herself, veiled and beautiful.

# On Robert Hughes - Part 1

*by Miles Mathis*



[Robert Hughes has been the art critic for *Time Magazine* since 1970. He wrote *The Shock of the New*—an influential overview of Modernism—as well as many other books on art and criticism. More recently he narrated a history of art for the BBC.]

Hughes' quotational prelude to his book *Nothing if not Critical* is from *Othello*:

*Desdemona*: What wouldst thou write of me,  
If thou shouldst praise me?

*Iago*: O gentle lady, do not put me to 't,  
For I am nothing if not critical.

*Desdemona*: Come on, assay.

All right, I shall assay. And I shall start out by praising, for a change. If you had to choose a non-artist to be an art critic in the 20th century, it would have to be Robert Hughes. He is well-read, clever,

funny, opinionated, pugnacious, and a very good writer to boot. He has been invaluable in his role as axe swinger in the Modern forest of deadwood. A burly, straight-shooting Australian, Hughes is a not a welcome sight to anyone out on a limb. He has taken the trunk out from under many big names in art, including Karen Finley, Robert Mapplethorpe, and Julian Schnabel. His analysis of the current state of the avant garde is often incisive and amusing. And much of his broader-based criticism of American postmodern culture is spot-on.

Of course, in my opinion, one doesn't have to be an artist to critique *Modern* art. Hughes is exempt, most of the time, from my standards of responsible criticism because he is not judging art but exposing its pretense. He really *could* do what Julian Schnabel does, if he hit his head and decided he wanted to.

In some ways Hughes has sounded the death knell of Modernism. I give him a great deal of credit for convincing many that Modern art has finally bottomed out. I do not believe in historical necessity, and I *do* believe in the great power of the individual: if Hughes had been of the Greenbergian mold, he might have propelled Modernism to even greater levels of falseness and insolence on his personal powers of persuasion alone. Instead Hughes has been arguing so loudly and so well that the stagnation of art is upon us, he has made some aware this fact at last (without, however, realizing how overdue such notice is.) He has seen the writing on the wall, has all but screamed that "art is dead"—but he can't seem to feel good about it. There is nothing, in his mind, to fill the gap. Fortunately there *is* a gap that needs filling for him, and that, if nothing else, sets him apart.

Despite all this I have always felt that on the whole, and at the most critical times, Hughes is a man "lost in his neighbor's fields" (as Whistler said of Ruskin). His cynicism surrounds and dismisses not only the dying gasps of Modernism, but often the viability of visual art itself. In one lecture we find him, for example, damning art because "What really changes political opinion is events, argument, press photographs, and TV." Or claiming that art is not "morally ennobling" or even "therapeutic" because it does not have an effect on everyone who comes in contact with it.

But this is like saying that because some boats sink, water is not bouyant. And judging art politically is simply to misjudge it, as he seems to understand at other times. For instance, he says in the very same lecture ["Art and the Therapeutic Fallacy," *The Culture of Complaint* ]:

Likewise, museum people serve not only the public but the artist...by a scrupulous adherence to high artistic and intellectual standards. This discipline is not quantifiable, but it is or should be disinterested, and there are two sure ways to wreck it. One is to let the art market dictate its values to the museum. The other is to convert it into an arena for battles that have to be fought—but fought in the sphere of politics. Only if it resists both can the museum continue with its task of helping us discover a great but always partially lost civilization: our own.

And so he answers his own question about changing political opinion: it is not the place of art to be so worldly. A political opinion is mainly analytical—an opinion on expediency or short-term viability—and therefore cannot be an artistic statement.

In this sense, politics may be thought of as the argument that determines the current structure. But art is part of the *substructure*. Hughes proves this in the next to the last paragraph of the lecture, where he gives a striking account of his reaction, as a woodworker himself, to seeing the great Japanese temple of Horyu-ji: "...resentment? Absolutely not. Reverence and pleasure, more like." Did he take away points because the temple had no message, made no statement, had no clear political, intellectual or linguistic undertones? I doubt it.

In fact, I know he didn't, for in a review of Chardin he says, "To see Chardin's work *en masse*, in the midst of a period stuffed with every kind of jerky innovation, narcissistic blurting and trashy 'relevance', is to be reminded that lucidity, deliberation, probity and calm are still the chief virtues of the art of painting." Of course they are, and only when Hughes is judging contemporary art does he forget this. For any contemporary art, almost any 20th century art, fails miserably when held to these standards.

In the second lecture in *The Culture of Complaint*, "Multi-Culti and Its Discontents," Hughes again proves he knows what art is for. He quotes a fellow Aussie, Andrew Riemer, who sees that

The literature of England [Tennyson, Keats, Shelley] conducted us into the world of the romantic imagination which served one of the essential needs of adolescence. It also catered generously for others: a heroic or noble past in which we could participate, and ethical structures to provide models for fantasies, if not for actual life.

Hughes does not take exception to this view. The only thing to be added to such a concise statement is that surely the needs of the imagination do not die with adolescence. We will always need, both as individuals and as a society, a source for such spiritual replenishment.

Still, Hughes is apt to forget this. He mentions William James' account of a trip to the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum in Boston with little reverence: "Visiting such a place, he [James] wrote, would give harried self-conscious Americans the chance to forget themselves, to become like children again, immersed in wonder." But Hughes begins the next paragraph with a sneer: "The idea that publicly accessible art would help dispel social resentment lay close to the heart of the American museum enterprise."

As if "forgetting themselves" and "dispelling social resentment" are strictly equivalent. Here Hughes has fallen into the modern trap of seeing all pleasure as politically regressive. He implies that classical art is simply or predominately an opiate. It does not follow, however, that children, or adults

*like* children, immersed in wonder, would have their social resentment dispelled by such an encounter with art. I believe it more likely that a positive encounter with art *causes* social resentment. For why, a visitor will think, should such moments of purity and wonder be available only in museums? Why, if such visions of beauty, peace, or emotional honesty are imaginable, are paintable, are they not liveable?

Despite his aggression toward certain contemporary artists, Hughes has come down on the side of the Moderns in their redefinition of art as theory and politics. *The Shock of the New*, his most influential book, is both panegyric and *apologia* for Modernism. He certainly never takes the big names in the book to task for anything. He rarely applies the same standards to the early stars of Modernism that he applies later to the lesser stars of PoMo. We get more myth-making than we do criticism. He is clearly not interested in attacking Modernism as a whole.

Although Hughes sometimes shows traditional tendencies, he never sides with classical writers. He would never agree with Hesiod, for instance, who said, "The Muses were born that they might be a forgetfulness of evils and a truce from all cares." Or with Schiller, who said, "All art is dedicated to Joy." These sentiments are clearly pre-Modern and passe, and no one who even knew of them, much less mentioned them in print, could have hoped to have been hired by any magazine in 1970, or accepted by a major publisher.

No, the opinions of pre-Modern artists and writers are never seriously addressed by Hughes, or anyone else, except in the case they can be given a spin in the direction of Modernism. Whistler is misrepresented as being a pre-formalist, for example, but what he actually said about art is never mentioned. Nor is Matthew Arnold, one of my favorite writers, who said this,

Tragic art has failed when a state of mental distress is prolonged, unrelieved by hope; in which there is everything to be endured, nothing to be done. In such situations there is inevitably something morbid, in the description of them something monotonous. When they occur in actual life, they are painful, not tragic; the representation of them in art is also painful.

Hughes would never mention it since clearly this one quote undercuts the entire Modern argument for its "shocking" choice of subject matter, and completely dissipates the "shock of the new." According to Hughes, the shock of contemporary art is meant to educate—at least to the extent that propaganda can educate. But not even propaganda can successfully propel by causing pain alone. Brutality and vulgarity, shock and horror, can educate and propel only in the way that tragedy has done, in the way that Arnold implies—that is, by artistically resolving the pain it causes. Modernism has attempted to divorce the subject matter of tragedy from its artistic context and forms. It causes visual or emotional or psychological pain without giving a clue to its end. In this way it has become an unwitting accomplice to the oppressor it claims to oppose—whether that oppressor is Nature or the Gods, in the

case of classical tragedy, or some social flaw, in the case of contemporary theory. It does not resolve pain, it only adds pain to pain. It does not educate through horror; it only horrifies further.



# On Robert Hughes - Part 2

*by Miles Mathis*



Hughes will occasionally admit, if you read between the lines, that there really isn't much there to bite on even with the artists he likes, such as Johns or Hockney. He says for example, "Johns' liking for paradox seemed, to many people raised on the Abstract Expressionist ideal of authenticity, quite dandified and pointless—art complacently regarding its own cleverness, in an emotional void. What one tends to forget, a quarter of a century after the event, is how badly some corrective to the clichés and slop of Abstract Expressionism was needed...." High praise indeed. Apparently what he means is that if one expects very little from a work of art in the first place, and then is careful only to compare it to what immediately preceded it chronologically, some Modern work can come off looking almost palatable. But why, really, leave these artists standing, if you are Robert Hughes? Why become indignant about the pretenses of Andrea Dworkin or Julian Schnabel, but leave Johns alone? Why call for standards and refuse to apply them?

Another artist that Hughes has left alone is Barnett Newman. Describing Newman's methods, Hughes admits, "On the evidence of his early drawings, he had no discernible talent as a draftsman... [but] he was tenacious and argumentative, and his reductive cast of mind served him well in the studio." Praise on this level hasn't been seen since Lewis Carroll and the Snark:

His form is ungainly—his intellect small—  
(So the Bellman would often remark)—  
But his courage is perfect! And that, after all,  
Is the thing that one needs with a Snark.

Hughes will not come out and say so, but what served Newman well was his talent was for talking about art (and making the right friends). His paintings are perfectly suited to criticism because they are created by a critic: his primary interest was in defining art, and his paintings are simply an example of a definition. His work is abstract in the fullest sense. It is not just abstract in content. It is not an abstraction from nature, an abstraction of line or color. It is an abstraction *from painting*. It is not a painting but an *example* of a painting, given a certain definition. It is a painting *of a definition*. One would expect the painting to come first, and then the criticism. With Newman the criticism came first and then the painting. It is the art of the *hysteron proteron*. This turned art history on its head, even more fully than Duchamp and the Dadas were able to do. The Dadas made *nothing* into art, but this "intellectual" coup was not as useful to the critic as Newman's coup. Newman made a *definition of art* into art, and a writer can say so much more about a definition than about nothing. A writer can say nothing about nothing for only so long, but he can say nothing about a definition indefinitely. As we have seen up to the present moment: the critic is still talking and art is still the handmaiden of Theory.

Beyond that, Hughes' compliment begs to be read in a different way than it was meant, due to that one word, *reductive*. "Reductive" means a) tending to reduce complex data to simple terms, and b) attempting to explain a process in the way that scientists would explain a theory about inanimate objects. The simplemindedness of the first definition is obvious, but the inartistic nature of the second definition is the one that most concerns me here. It is important that one understand this "reductive cast" and how it colors Modern criticism. But to make clear how [unintentionally, I take it] damaging Hughes choice of adjectives is here, and how it fits into the present argument, I must go a little farther a-field. In psychology, behaviorism is a reductive theory that has had great influence in the twentieth century. B.F. Skinner is just one of its many well-known proponents. A behaviorist treats his or her psychological subjects (whether animal or human) as machines whose actions can be predicted by an objective study of the outward responses of these subjects to stimuli. The "inner workings" of these machines is of no interest because they cannot be quantified. The behaviorist is not interested in ideas, only in actions. Behaviorism dismisses as groundless any theory that attempts to go beyond a strictly scientific method. Like all the "hard" sciences—which modern psychology so wants to be—behaviorism does fairly well within the narrow limits it has set for itself. Unfortunately it has little insight into those questions that have naturally intrigued psychologists since Hellenistic times. What is the nature of the human mind? Where do ideas come from? Is thought existence? (*Cogito ergo sum?*) And many others.

Obviously there is a close tie between the modern schools of psychology and art. Both are heavily analytical. Both have been burdened by the smashing success of the hard sciences. Ever since the influence of the logical positivists (and probably since the influence of David Hume), philosophy, and

especially epistemology and aesthetics, have become more and more quantized, scientific, and left-brain in order to continue to be taken seriously. Aesthetics, our primary concern here, hardly exists anymore in its original form. In the 20th century, questions about the nature of beauty were replaced by questions about "purification." Or, where the philosopher was once interested in the nature of creativity and the source of the artistic impulse, he now became interested in the place of art in therapy or in the production of well-rounded workers for industry. In the 1930's, Walter Benjamin judged artists on their relation to production and equated a work's political *tendency* to its artistic *quality*. He accepted without reserve the idea (that he got from Marx, but that he might just as well have gotten from Locke or Smith) that everything must be judged economically. For him the only question was, is the painting pro-capitalist or pro-communist? Since the 30's, politics has changed somewhat, but the attitude is the same. That is, art is judged politically rather than aesthetically. We are no longer interested in Social Realism as propaganda for Commune or Empire, but we are certainly interested in art as a mouthpiece of progressive politics. We are no longer so naive as to simply illustrate our ideas; but that art is *about* ideas, no one who matters in art would question.

Hughes confirms this again and again. In his review of Philip Pearlstein, Hughes says,

"Pearlstein's dispassionate drawing gives the whole mass of the body an analyzed presence, and in its perceptible vehemence of thought seems to be beyond mannerism. There was in fact something in common between the blunt discourse of Pearlstein's approach and the tough, detached polemic of much of American abstract art in the 60's. Both recognizably come from the same culture, where what you see is what you get. "

Notice the words "analyzed," "discourse" and "polemic"—art as an argument. This is what art was expected to be, so Hughes took no exception to it. Nor did he critique Pearlstein in other ways. He didn't lead the reader to a proper conclusion about what all this meant about Pearlstein (although it seems pretty obvious) because he wanted to keep Pearlstein around. Pearlstein's return to realism, to the nude, pleased Hughes (I assume) and so he refrained from making any negative comparisons of Pearlstein's nudes to historical nudes that perhaps pleased him more. But in giving Pearlstein preferential treatment, he cemented Pearlstein's place at the top of the heap. In refusing to tell the whole truth, he gave a false impression of Pearlstein's abilities. And, most importantly, in glossing over the implications of Pearlstein's "philosophy," he added to the shelf-life of that philosophy.

For five pages later, no longer discussing Pearlstein, Hughes admits,

"A cloud of uneasy knowingness has settled on American painting and sculpture. Its mark is a helpless skepticism about the very idea of deep engagement between art and life: a fear that to seek authentic feeling is to display naivete, to abandon one's jealously hoarded "criticality" as an artist."

This is my favorite quote of Hughes. But he refuses to make the connection between this "cloud" and Pearlstein's cloud. It is the same. Pearlstein will not "deeply engage" himself in his art or his life, his nudes are purposefully cold and inhuman, he makes no effort to transcend his precious "criticality," but Hughes will let him get away with it. He lets him slide, just as he lets Kitaj or Hockney slide in claiming to draw well, just as he lets Lucian Freud slide with a much deeper emptiness.

Hughes will not come right out and say that the entire Modern aesthetic (or lack of one) has been fatally flawed from the start. He can't. But the belief is implied in his work. If a critic's panegyrics to the Johns and Pollocks of the world are mainly non-sensical, while his equal-time critiques of these same artists are spot-on and terribly damaging, it is not hard to see the sum total of his remarks.

As the years passed and his status as an important person became less and less assailable, Hughes became more and more critical of the *avant garde*. The 1970's meant little to him, and the 80's he has dismissed as the decade of "monetized art". And although he is still loath to take on the 50's and 60's (because it was, in a sense, *his* time), and although the time of Picasso and Kandinsky, Miro and Chagall, Arp and Picabia, has taken on a kind of sacrosanct historicity that no one who makes his money from art criticism would think of taking on except in little fragments, Hughes' writing betrays a wistfulness that gives those such as me hope. His outlook on the future of art is so bleak and his arguments against Classicism so weak, one almost imagines he is asking for another Renaissance.

It seems to me that Hughes is genuinely frightened about the future of art, as well he should be. And so he feels compassion for the poor wretch, Modernism: he cannot kick a man when he is down. He is no doubt afraid that too much aggression toward the roots of Modernism could throw us into an artistic dark age. It is therefore one thing to butcher David Salle and Julian Schnabel and another thing entirely to demythologize the likes of Picasso or Cezanne or Kandinsky.

But he forgets that Modernism has never been the ground beneath anyone's feet. The 20th century has been proud of its day-to-day existence. It has needed no tradition. How could it create one? He should know that all the momentary blips of Modernism are already as good as gone. No one misses them *now*. How could their further fading or complete disappearance be a tragedy?

At the end of *The Shock of the New* Hughes says, "The signs of that constriction [novelty] are everywhere today—in the small ambitions of art, in its lack of any effort toward spirituality, in its sense of career rather than vocation, in its frequently bland occupation with semantics at the expense of the deeper passions of the creative self... Perhaps the great energies of modernism are still latent in our culture, like Ulysses' bow in the house of Penelope; but nobody seems able to string and draw it."

This is because the latent energies that Hughes has just so concisely described are not Modern but Classical: "creating a sense of wholeness in opposition to the world's chaos," rising above the "bulk of the familiar," demanding "an effort toward spirituality," great ambitions (artistic, not political), treating

art as a calling and a craft rather than as a career: these goals are the goals of tradition, not of the *avant garde*.

The real foundations of art are unassailable by Hughes or anyone else. Time and wars will continue to eat up some of them, but as the Dadaists recognized truly, there are a lot of great works left. It has taken all the energy of Modernism to suppress the instruction of the Greeks, of the Renaissance, of the Far East, of the 17th c. Dutch and Spanish painters, and of the 19th century Barbizons, Naturalists, and Romantics. But the possibilities remain. The examples of Phidias and Praxiteles, Michelangelo and Titian, Rembrandt and Rubens, Velasquez and El Greco, Corot and Courbet, Carpeaux and Rodin still exist. I am not afraid of an artistic dark age. I have already lived through one and survived.

For more on Hughes, go to my paper from 2011 called [Robert Hughes and the Royal Academy](#). You may also read my 2005 letter to [Hughes at the Guardian](#).

## A Report from London

*by Miles Mathis*



As an artist and a bit of a Luddite I don't normally keep up with the various media. The trash created, both physical and psychical, cannot be fully composted, and my mind wanders in greener pastures. I take no newspapers or magazines, never watch TV news, and rarely browse news online. Occasionally I seek specific information on current events, but I have found that most of my research time is better spent reading old books. My friends and relatives send me clippings as grist for my columns; left to myself I fear I would never be *au courant*. I store and assimilate all that meets my eye, but seeking out the bad news of the present seems to me somehow morbid. I face it only because I must—I flee but it always finds me.

Here in Europe it has found me all the quicker. In seeking new friends and clients, I run more slowly from society, and the media leaps upon me in its stead. This farce has its better moments, one of them being now, when I can report to you the latest art news from London. This may be of interest to American readers especially, who find it difficult to get non-war, non-business news from the rest of the world.

As it happens, it is a very eventful time for art in Europe. In this article I will only report on London, since much of my news comes from the BBC. But throughout Europe changes that parallel those in London are taking place, and realism is advancing universally, I think I may say. Before you begin cheering I must make clear what sort of realism is advancing. The big event this week was the televised unveiling of a huge mosaic copy of Constable's *The Haywain* on Trafalgar Square. Various English cities supplied the 144 tesserae of the mosaic, each one being shipped in at the last moment via police escort. Film crews in helicopters followed the progress of the convoys as the clock ticked suspensefully. At last the hundred-foot curtain fell and the mob went wild, stunned by the sights and sounds extravaganza—and cued by the monitors.

This circus was the idea of Rolf Harris, the host of a shockingly successful series on art that has run since 2001. Rolf has been called the Bob Ross of Britain (and if he hasn't, let me be the first). He paints in a sad, stilted impressionistic style that beats Ross and Thomas Kinkaid only in that Rolf can paint figures. A friendly, handsome, silver-haired man with a beard, Rolf relies more on his unassuming charm and everyman demeanor than on any real talent. He surrounds himself with famous amateurs and celebrities past their prime—Jane Seymour was the eye candy at the Haywain debacle. But Rolf is undeniably big business. Much bigger than Bob Ross and now arguably bigger than Kinkaid. Kinkaid likely still sells more works (if retouched posters are works), but Rolf recently had a show at the National Gallery. That would be like Kinkaid having a show at the Metropolitan. [Such a show may be in the near future: if the Met can show motorcycles and *haute couture*, a Kinkaid show may be just down the pipe.] In addition, Rolf was just chosen as The World's Greatest Artist in a British poll, beating out Damien Hirst, Tracey Emin, and the other darlings of Saatchi Gallery and the Tate Modern.

What all this means for the future of art is difficult to say. I think it would be naive to assume that it is an unambiguously good sign. It is certainly refreshing to see such a huge crowd turn out to witness and take part in copies from the old masters. But huge crowds have also recently turned out for the Tate Modern: people in London are bored—they will turn out for anything. You could unveil a hundred-foot pile of wet nappies on Trafalgar Square and a million people would turn out to see them stacked by celebrities and filmed from helicopters. In fact, the art at the Tate Modern is the equivalent of wet nappies, and records have been broken even without Jane Seymour and Cliff Richard on hand to leaven the lump.

I have said elsewhere that the public is a potential ally of realism, but an uninformed or misinformed public is only another, and more powerful, enemy. I am reminded once again of Whistler's *Ten O'clock Lecture*, where he said, in 1885,

Art is upon the town!—to be chucked under the chin by the passing gallant—to be enticed within the gates of the householder—to be coaxed into company as a proof of culture and refinement... Alas, ladies and gentlemen, Art has been maligned. She has nought in common with such practices. She is a goddess of dainty thoughts... selfishly occupied with her own perfection only.

A public that thinks that art is the equivalent of a quilting bee or a telethon or a State Fair is not much use to the artist. I may not be an expert on the mass media but I know from experience that any event that relies on the drawing power of celebrities—celebrities from other fields, no less—is not an event to be trusted. And I know that any field in which mediocre people are more famous than talented people is a debased field, one that has been sold to some principle foreign to it.

In this case that principle is clearly economic. Rolf Harris and his sundry allies and comrades have seen a way to put themselves in the spotlight and make more money despite the fact that they have done nothing to deserve either. In this they are absolutely on a par with the avant garde. In both instances we see prodigious promotion and nothing to promote.

Some may argue that increased public awareness and involvement is always a good thing, and that such involvement is bound to benefit the realist movement as a whole. As much as I would like to believe that, I don't. The type of awareness and involvement is crucial, and 100-foot copies of the *Haywain* on Trafalgar Square cannot add to the public's appreciation of the subtleties and depths of real art. Art as the Bowdlerizing of another's work, art as a garish spectacle, art as a public project, art as a media event, art as the gigantic, the equal-opportunity, the therapeutic—all these misapplications and misdefinitions of art move the public in the wrong direction. Replacing the mediocre political posing of the avant garde with the amateur daubings of celebrities is not progress. It is trading one shallow polluted pool for another.

As it turns out, both shallow pools are doing quite well, and there is really no talk of replacement. London is truly Pluralistic, and Rolf and the avant garde are co-existing in relative peace. Just today I saw Tracey Emin (famous for putting her bed in a museum) on Room 101, talking at great length about vomiting in cabs, her fame seemingly untouched by the growing regard for Rolf. Also of interest: it costs nine pounds (\$17) to get into the avant-garde Saatchi Gallery, and yet they find no lack of visitors, though the great British Museums are all free of charge now. It appears that the public is beyond making judgments and drawing distinctions, and this is hardly surprising since both the avant garde and the new realists have taught them not to. It would be undemocratic, you see. So the public is now in a position to applaud anything that is presented to them with the proper fanfare. It is obvious how convenient this must be for the Mayor of London and the Chamber of Commerce. In fact, it is convenient for just about everyone except the truly distinguished and exceptional artists. They are lost in the blast of trumpets, the tramp of feet, and the buzz of helicopters.

Given all that, I still believe that the public could be enfranchised in the rebirth of art. The solution, however, is not indiscriminate involvement—luring them out of the house with bread, circuses and Jane Seymour. That only encourages frivolity and the further degradation of all serious enterprise and achievement. The government-owned media could be used to give air-time and face-time to the finest artists, instead of to the most ambitious mediocrities. If the same amount of time and money were spent promoting truly fine art as is spent popularizing and glorifying make-work projects and glitzy charades, art history would surely benefit. If the public requires grand spectacles in open spaces, these could be



arranged with infinitely more taste and education. I am not suggesting we take their beer and tarts from them, I am suggesting we treat the public as adults—as emotionally mature people who may be capable of enjoying art as art, not as car chase or fanfare or special effect. The 16th-century Florentines did not need helicopters flying overhead and police-escorted convoys and thousand-watt bulbs to appreciate the unveiling of the *David*. Surely they were as ignorant as we are, and yet there was a tacit assumption that even the most ill-educated and barbarous among them had a soul—and that some corner of that soul, deeply buried perhaps, but hungry, might respond to art. And if they didn't—if their souls were all maggot and vermin—they could go elsewhere. It was not Michelangelo's job to appeal to every last wretch. It was Michelangelo's job to create great art: it was the viewer's responsibility to deserve it.

This all goes to say that we are doing the public no service in talking down to it. In giving it what it wants or expects. Art does not have to be a boring sermon or lecture, but it has to remain art. Beyond a certain point, it cannot be vulgarized or popularized without losing its essence. A giant copy of *The Haywain* is not art, it is an art event. The only possible use of an art event is to educate, but, as I have shown, the event in question mis-educated. Art is in great need of news coverage, promotion, and public access. But not like this.

## **Sport as Art - *An Alternate Olympic Commentary***

[This article was never printed by ARC, and I never argued too much about it. It is a bit off topic. Still, I took the time to write it, so I may as well post it here.]

Some may find it odd to discover sport commentary on ARC, especially from one who, only scant weeks ago, dismissed sport as unimportant. And odd it is—so much the better, I think, in this age of conformity—an age when the range of discussion upon almost every topic has constricted to near unity. A bilateral argument has become a sign of great tolerance; and a trilateral argument, well, that would be considered chaos. So if I don't appear gloriously out of touch and fabulously marginalized here, it won't be from a lack of trying.

I honestly have nothing against sport, as a category, or even against watching sport. As a young man I pursued several sports seriously and I still keep myself in sporting shape. I have watched a lot of sport with great enjoyment, and I sometimes enjoy watching it even now. But the commercialization of sport—the disproportionate amount of money and hype involved—has come very close to souring me on watching sport altogether. I do not think I am alone in this. Concerning the Olympics, it occurs to me that it was a great mistake to allow professionals into the games. They have not so much raised the bar as polluted the pool. The so-called Dream Team is the best example. Allen Iverson, with his full-body tattoos, trash talk and flagrant fouls, is a disgrace to his country, and the rest of the team and coaches are not much better. Nor is good sportsmanship in evidence in other venues or from other countries. Swimmers refusing to shake hands with each other, cyclists throwing their bottles down and stamping their feet, track stars strutting and posing, and everyone making excuses and filing protests. The doping scandals are only the cherry on top of this infamous sundae.

Now is where I become eccentric. The whole worth of the Olympics has dwindled for me to the beauty of one sport: Rhythmic Gymnastics. Not what is called Artistic Gymnastics—the tumbling and balance beam and all that. No, there is a lot of skill but very little art left in Artistic Gymnastics. As the girls have become younger and younger the art—that is to say the dance—has been gleaned out of the exercises. Beyond the physical beauty of the bodies there is little left to appeal to an artist's eye.

But Rhythmic Gymnastics, as almost pure dance, has remained an art, even when lost amidst the deafening spectacle of hypersport surrounding it in other venues. Invented by Isadora Duncan, one the founders of Modern Dance, Rhythmic Gymnastics is unlike any other event of the games. Although Duncan was American, Rhythmic became big first in the East, especially in Russia. It was dominated by Eastern Bloc countries until recently, when the Mediterranean States have also taken an interest, and taken medals. Some will remember that Spain's program peaked in Barcelona, and Italy is now strong as well. In the US most consider it a joke, I take it, somewhere beneath the seriousness of bad minton and skeet shooting. Underfed waifs from Kiev kicking a hoop about on a mat. It normally gets aired after Letterman and Conan, and even then the announcer will cutaway for an emergency update from synchronized shuffleboard or the knitting heptathlon. Fortunately, here in Europe the coverage is much better. The Spanish and German stations carry it in primetime, and today I even got to watch *team*

Rhythmic for the first time—full coverage of a qualifying round! But you have to understand that there are no car or drug commercials here, so the stations have an extra six or eight hours to fill out of every 24. In the US and UK it is also required that you watch touching and poignant mini-biographies of all the millionaire athletes: their trails and tribulations and all recent family tragedies—how Dad is suffering from chilblains and how Rover the three-legged dog saved the neighbor's guinea pig from that open well, and so on. It is a blessing they even have time to run the events.

Rhythmic Gymnastics is deceptively simple. It is a dance to music, performed with a prop. The props are five in number: ball, hoop, ribbon, rope, and clubs. Each prop is used alone; that is, the dancer works with a ball or a hoop, but not both. In team Rhythmic, the team of five uses either ribbons or hoops and balls. The purest routine is performed by a single dancer with a ball. The ball, despite being thrown, bounced and balanced in extraordinary ways, is meant to appear an extension of the dancer's body. Some will think of a stripped-down Cirque du Soleil when they first see Rhythmic, but it has more in common with the ballet. Like the ballet, Rhythmic showcases feminine beauty. But here males do not take part even as courtiers. Dancers have years of ballet training and they look like ballerinas, tall and lean. There is a greater attention to costumes than in Artistic Gymnastics, although dancers never wear tutus or headpieces. Many routines are performed to classical or orchestral music, or, as in the case of the Chinese or the Spanish, to regional music. The music is not just background, as it is in a tumbling routine. It sets the mood for the art.

Rhythmic dancers are famous for their rubber backs and legs, but unlike the Chinese acrobats in the circus, they never put themselves in ungraceful or painful-looking positions. The art is to make every leap and turn look easy and flowing, not to make it look freakish. A ball or hoop is balanced or caught in midair not to elicit a gasp but to create an artistic effect. The greatest gymnasts are not those with the greatest technical difficulty but those who have demonstrated the greatest artistic use of the prop. This has not changed in recent years, although difficulty has definitely increased. Dancers are still shown tapes of masters like Timoschenko, who dominated the sport with routines of relatively low difficulty and innovation. And judges seem to remain aware of their sport's tradition, despite the pressure of novelty.

Not that there isn't some danger of Rhythmic devolving into circus tricks. *Cirque du Soleil* often hires from the Rhythmic corps, and the modern tendency to turn everything into a glitzy spectacle has not escaped the sport. It, like everything else, is liable to fall prey to its own success. In trying to appeal to a wider audience, it sets itself up for bastardization and Bowdlerizing. But, as of now, it is still a very beautiful form of disciplined dance—one of the few left in the world.

I suppose the question is, in this forum, why do I consider Rhythmic to be dance, and therefore a form of art, whereas all the other events at the Olympics are only sports. It is due, in the main, to its emphasis on artistic presentation. It was invented by a dancer to be a dance, and it remains a dance. That is, it is set to music and, at its best, expresses emotion. It is not just a limit of speed or endurance or precision, it is a complex craft learned to produce an artistic effect. No other Olympic sport can say this. Diving is a lovely use of space, and were it set to music and a bit more complex it might claim to be dance. Its setting and judging preclude this however. Diving judges can legally take no note of the diver's body or clothing. An ugly swimsuit or bad haircut is of no interest. In Rhythmic these things matter because they are part of the effect of the dance. Even a bruise or a bandage can cause a negative

impression. The dance cannot be beautiful if the dancer is not beautiful.

Some of course will say that all this makes Rhythmic sexist, regressive, and prejudicial against non-waifs. But for me it is the very reason that it transcends the category of sport. It is not about higher, stronger, faster. Nor is it a game, where one tries to outscore an opponent by completing a practical task—putting a ball into a basket, hitting a target, jumping a fence. The dancer's sole object is to create beauty, and she is judged predominately on her ability to do so.

The Winter Olympics has figure skating, which retains its marks for artistic impression. But although it can sometimes attain the level of art—I am thinking of Oksana Bayul in 1994—it rarely does anymore. Figure skating has followed Artistic Gymnastics in preferring jumps and spins to artistry, and a routine that has very little dance or art in it may score high if it has the requisite number of triples. Few skaters outside Russia have extensive dance training, and the trend seems to be to make skating more athletic and less artistic. Even when dance remains in skating, it remains only as a cool formalism. The difference between Michelle Kwan and Oksana Bayul is one of feeling. Oksana intuitively understood that dance was invented to express emotion. Michelle learned the movements by rote, so that her grace carried no feeling with it. She was lovely but flat.

Of course this is always a problem in all dances, from ballet to tango, and indeed in all the arts. Most Rhythmic Gymnasts suffer from it, most pianists suffer from it, most painters suffer from it. A technique that is flawless but flat. Athletic performances need not concern themselves with such things, since flawless execution is all there is in sport. Sport generates excitement in other ways—competition, rivalry, patriotism, suspense, and pure sweat. Melancholy, nostalgia, longing—these subtler and deeper emotions of art have no place in sport. No one was surprised to find them in Oksana's Black Swan routine, since she was skating to Tchaikovsky, but these emotions would be strange if elicited by an archery contest or a hockey match. That is the ultimate difference between art and sport. That is why art is a skill of a different order and why artists have historically been valued over athletes. They are rarer; they cause a deeper and more lasting impression. And they educate the spirit. Watching sport is a temporary thrill; viewing art is a broadening of the mind. Beyond the passion to win, and the emotion of winning (and losing), sport is mostly passionless and emotionless. The emotional complexity of sport is near zero. This is part of its charm, no doubt, even for intellectuals: it allows the mind to rest. Sport is a physical activity requiring little or no intellect. Athletes may be intelligent, but there is usually no reason for them to be. The finest athletes are often quite ignorant people. I know this is the common opinion regarding artists, too, but if you read the letters of Michelangelo or van Gogh or Rodin or Whistler or even Duchamp, you discover an intellect of a much higher order than that of a Michael Jordan or a Jack Nicklaus.

You will say that is not the question here. I am proposing Rhythmic Gymnastics as an art, so I must prove that these girls with their hoops and balls are smarter than their counterparts in the 110m hurdles or in weightlifting. That would be beyond me, obviously, but it is not necessary. Most of the intellectual content and some of the emotional content of any dance is provided by its inventor, its choreographer, and the composer and performer of the music. A dance is artistic not because the specific dancer is a genius but because its form sets up the potential for a beautiful performance in the hands, or legs, of a talented dancer. Sport has none of this. The closest it comes is a coach preparing a play, as in basketball. I don't think I need to prove that Isadora Duncan, Tchaikovsky, and dance choreographers

trained at the Kirov are intellectually and artistically superior to the Dream Team coaches.

In closing I will make a couple of comments concerning the presentation of Rhythmic Gymnastics. I feel that the artistic effect of the dance would be greatly increased by better lighting. Lower, warmer lighting and the use of spots, rather than the superbright floods, would create a much more pleasing atmosphere. The audience and surrounding walls should also be blacked out, for the same reason. The background is entirely too busy for the viewer to see the subtle movements of the various apparati.

I also noticed that most routines in these games were choreographed to very up-tempo music, in order to allow the dancer to better pack the routine with maneuvers. This is a mistake, I feel. Many of the finest routines of the past, especially with the ball, were danced to slower, more lyrical music. The hoop and even the ribbon can also be danced quite successfully to slower music. As a dance the appeal of which is due mainly to its classical elements, Rhythmic should flee more modern noisy music and all hectic disquieting music. It should also beware of garish colors in costume and prop. This year's winner Kabaeva danced with an apple-green ribbon while dressed in a sequined black leotard—a major visual *faux-pas*. Other competitors' costumes were equally colorblind. For me, the costumes are most effective that are both regional and traditional. Either that or completely simple—like a one-color leotard that takes into account the dancer's skintone. Baby blue on black skin or hot pink on alabaster skin cannot work, for example.

And finally, the dance has an entire category specifically reserved for artistic effect, but the judges seem unaware or unconfident how to use it. It should be used as a very strong counterweight both to the “difficulty” mark and to the marks for errors in execution. An extraordinarily beautiful dancer with a couple of minor errors should never lose to a less beautiful dancer with a perfect routine. Nor should a boring routine with great difficulty outscore a beautiful and exciting routine with less difficulty.

As in figure skating, the judges and ruling body of Rhythmic must continually strengthen the marks for artistic impression or they will end up being drowned out by ever-increasing difficulty in execution. Until very recently, Rhythmic seemed to be dealing with this issue. These Olympics games gave me somewhat less confidence.

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## *Tess as Ophelia*



*pastel, 18 x 13 in.*



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## *Nude on Ottoman*



*pastel*  
*17 x 28 in.*

# A Review of the Paul Oxborough Exhibition London

*by Miles Mathis*



This is the first in a planned series of reviews of contemporary exhibits. Since I have not seen five sensible words together printed in the mainstream press on art in my lifetime, I now leap into that void and try to kick it into some useful form. That is what artists do, you know, one way or another. They fill voids, or look like fools trying to. Most modern people with any education believe it makes more sense to keep quiet, but artists are not modern people. They retain the perhaps indefensible view that it is better to try and fail than to do nothing. They are not especially scared of looking like fools, since only fools fall in love, make realist art, have strong opinions, etc. In short, people who were not scared of looking like fools did everything that has ever been done. Besides, I am reminded of what J.D. Salinger once said, in effect: If you want to read a page and can't find it, write it yourself. If no one else will tell you an interesting story, tell yourself one. If no one else will speak sense, speak sense yourself, if only *to yourself*. Which is as much to say, if you leave this page in disgust, I will still be here, amusing the ever-lovely Muse.

I have claimed in a hundred places, sometimes at top volume, that art criticism is, or should be, the duty of artists. All other criticism or commentary is unqualified at best and nefarious at worst. Historically we are in the belly of "at worst." Every single word published by publishers of all kinds is now absolute bollocks of some sort, and the more famous it is the more wicked. I don't deny that there are other poor neglected souls shivering in the wilderness, saying things that are true and helpful. But you aren't likely to have met them or heard them either. The mainstream does a very efficient job making sure of that. If the words you are reading have been edited by anyone anywhere they are probably not worth reading. They have been watered down so as not to offend your neighbor, and the



odds that they have any real content are near zero. The more you are paying for your information, the more worthless it is. You are paying the salaries of lines of editors who justify their existence by bowdlerizing and eviscerating everything they touch. Committees do not have opinions, they have averaged agendas, which are as useful to real people as diet cola or plastic furniture.

All of which is a rather odd lead-in to a review. . . so all the better. The long and short of it is that I believe I am in a pretty good position to say interesting and meaningful things about Paul Oxborough. In fact, there probably aren't five people in the world in a better position to tell you why you should go to his exhibitions, buy his paintings, and what to look for when you do. The reason for this is that I am what I call an "accidental peer". I don't know Paul, have never met or spoken to him, didn't go to school with him, know nothing about him personally, and have no financial ties to him. I have never shared gallery space with him or even traded recipes for varnish. Despite all that he and I have much in common. He is someone I can comment on with real sympathy. Paul and I are about the same age and we both were weaned, at least partially, on Ratcliff's *Sargent* book. We share this distinction, I imagine, with Dan Gerhartz and Steven Levin and Scott Burdick and many others. Although we come from different places, all of us emerged in the 90's. And although we are now moving our separate ways, a review of specific paintings from the 90's might convince someone that we all graduated from the same atelier.

One might say that Oxborough has kept to Sargent better than the rest of us. Gerhartz pushed through Schmid to Sorolla and then to a use of color that is more like Jamie Wyeth than anything else I can think of, with that use of straight yellow and a current predilection for all stronger tones. I have gone the opposite direction, reversing into grays and browns and often tightening my brushwork, influenced by Whistler and Titian and many others. But Oxborough has remained true to the faith, continuing to learn more from Sargent with each passing year.

[This review is of the Albemarle Gallery exhibition in London in October 2005. Readers can follow my commentary by referring to the images on the [gallery website](#). All other Oxborough images cited may be found at the [Eleanor Ettinger website](#). I saw the London show in person and have seen several of Oxborough's shows at Eleanor Ettinger in New York, so be assured this review is not based only upon webimages.] Oxborough's ties to Sargent are gloriously clear in his views of Venice. I mean this as no slight, since there is no pastiche in these works, and having debts is a good sign, not the reverse. For example, a small oil called *Gondolas* is a perfect gem, worthy of Sargent himself but by no means a knock-off. The colors are high without being too high, and the brushwork fits the size of the piece like a glove fits a master's hand. *Venice at Night* is also clever—a successful little nightscene. And three others from Venice are also satisfying: *Laundry*, *In the Chapel*, and *Alleyway*. All are small and brilliantly off-hand. They impress without chucking you under the chin.

Of Oxborough's other work featured on the website, *Spring* is the most successful, I think. He cuts off a foot and the most obvious hand could have a bit more definition, even as a sketch, but the main head is smashing and Oxborough somehow makes horizontal stripes work. As a piece of color harmony it is perfect, and the feel is peaceful and real without being flabby or sentimental. *Cuddle* is another charmer, one of Oxborough's golden paintings that borrows from Sargent's *Artist in his Studio* (Boston MFA) and takes it to new places. *Before Bed* is yet another, with lots of lovely yellow sheets. As a

sample of brushwork, it is stunning, and one could only critique it on the basis of content.

*Self Portrait with Drawings* is another success.



Perfect color harmony, effortless brush, and enough subject interest to hold it all together. Such paintings tend to teeter into a focusless morass of detail, and this one veers momentarily in that direction; but it does not fall. The most jarring note—the blue bottle—fails to harmonize, pulls us away from the focus and the main lines of movement for no apparent reason. It is not so much the blue as it is the modernity of the “thing”. One intuitively hates the thing for its ugly label; asks if it is plastic. But there is so much good here it is easy to forgive, if not to forget.



One of the stars of the show—based on size—is *Repose in Blue, Silver and Gold* (21” x 36”). Once again a reviewer finds nothing to complain of in color harmony or brushwork. But somehow the work fails to generate any real excitement. I believe this is because the sofa spread is more impressive in all ways than the girl, and this is not how it should be. It is not that she is not gorgeous, it is that she is not featured. She is covered by a plain black dress and her face, though error-free, has no special claims to attention. In fact, her feet are far more enticing, for reasons of composition and lighting more than anything. But the focus of the painting is the shine on the spread. This turns the painting inside out. The stripes don’t work here either, since they also confuse the eye. Oxborough has, in a masterly manner, painted a complex pattern over a stripe. But its effect in the end is to usurp the natural focus of the painting, which should be on the girl.

*Jade and Gold* is upside down in much the same way. The coat overwhelms the woman, and her small eyes look all the smaller, despite the mascara. We have perfect color and brushwork, but not really a convincing focus. The hand looks like it has been moved, but it is still not clearly in the right place. Oxborough has kept it on the canvas by main force.

Most of the rest of the works in the show are Oxborough’s signature restaurant scenes, which I find fatally banal. All share the lovely brushwork of Sargent’s *Breakfast Table* (at Harvard), but none have its charm. Sargent’s work is already on the edge of banality, being only an exposition of glassware and china with a dashed-off head. Oxborough downgrades this with fake orange lighting and frivolous NY people, leaving us hungry for content.

I stated in passing above that *Before Bed* could only be critiqued on its content, and I believe that is the case with most of Oxborough’s work. In my opinion a painting should not be as easy to digest as a snapshot, and some of Oxborough’s work is just too light. The two models in *Before Bed* are throwaways; they have no artistic weight. You could get as compelling models and poses in any bedroom in the world, and I do not mean this as a compliment to democracy or equal-time. The girls are not as interesting as the sheets, and this is not how it should be. The restaurant scenes take this to its limit: there is nothing but brushwork here, and that is just not enough.

Oxborough’s many self portraits also confirm this. Mystifyingly, they are some of his weakest work. He seems completely uninterested in his own character. Once again he is studying the light, and world, bouncing off him, and can’t seem to be bothered to look into his own eyes. He is always at a distance. When he is not pretending to be Robert Louis Stevenson he is just a blank face, two inches square. The only time we get a closer look he is pulling a monkeyface, as if he absolutely will not give anything away. This is not what a self portrait was meant to be. Forget Rembrandt or Van Gogh, just look at this self portrait by my friend Van Nielsen.



Nothing being held back there, baby. If that is too intense for you, try this one.





We get a lifesize head where we can see the eyes, and the eyes and pose are telling us the whole story. That is the sort of thing we want from a self portrait, not some little dash and dab thing that was painted with a cup of sugarcoffee in hand.

One also has to wonder about the precise genesis of the 6 x 8 in. cow painting. I doubt there is any precedent for it in art history before Santa Fe, circa 1975. I mean particularly the little 15-minute affair, where pretty blobs of paint sort of mimic cow shapes or cloud shapes or shadows. The idea for this probably came from looking at Sargent as well, although I can't remember that he ever took it to this ridiculous limit. Sketching is great, but these things aren't sketches. They are intended as finished

products and are cranked out just for the known market. They differ from Whistler's tiny little paintings and pastels in that Whistler was really interested in capturing a mood. But these new "sketches" simply act as paint samples. They say to the buyer, "look at my brush flit about, aha!" and nothing more.

I don't know it for a fact but I suspect Oxborough's galleries have pushed him in this angelfood cake direction, since harmless little scenes and whatnot seem to sell well, for reasons beyond my personal comprehension. Whereas I could see buying *Hot Fudge Sundaes*



to hang in a sunny happy room, I cannot fathom the appeal, to artist or buyer, of a work like *The Bartenders* or *Bistro* or *Dark Bar*. Who pays top dollar for a blurry nothing like this? Apparently a lot of people. Eleanor Ettinger and a thousand other galleries are littered with this sort of thing, so people's homes must be too. New illustrators, hatched as if by magic, arrive every year to supply the constant demand for 12" x 15" interiors and café scenes; Oxborough is only the current sales leader in this category. The same market that threatens to corrupt Oxborough and his Ettinger comrades on the east coast is threatening Jeremy Lipking on the west and many others in between. I myself have had several galleries ask for local scenes like this—to sell to the clueless tourists, I guess. In Munich they want scenes of Munich, in Prague they want Prague, in NY they want NY, and in Oklahoma City they want . . . anything but Oklahoma City. I am sure that Oxborough has a family to feed, blah blah, but now he also has me reminding him that he is much too talented to waste his time with puff pieces. He has hit forty, he has the big studio and money in the bank. Time for him to really air it out, to show us what he can do. And I don't mean technically. I mean in terms of content. In terms of emotion and artistic depth. Of his larger works, only *Silver and Green*



really impresses me. The rest of them appear rushed, as if the galleries are giving him quotas. He is too young to be plagiarizing himself already. He seems to be selling almost everything he paints now, and that can be a terrible pressure. I have seen it destroy many artists. Galleries don't like to be out of stock, and once your backlog is gone, you are back-to-the-wall.

The hardest works to get done under such pressure are the large ones. You can't dash off a large work like you can a small. Ideally you have to hunt for models, dig for ideas, research poses and compositions, stare at the ceiling for inspiration, wait for appointments. If you have Oxborough's hand all you need for a small work these days is a good photo. I have heard other artists scold him for using photos, but I don't go there. I don't care if he is using photos or camera obscuras or holograms beamed from alien spacecraft. I am only concerned with the finished product. Whether the model sat there the whole time is not the point. The point is that the paintings, beyond the paint, rarely have any artistic purchase. They have no emotional weight. No matter what size, they come off as studies of light. There is more to art than studying light, my friend. I don't deny him the right to his *Hot Fudge Sundaes*, which I like as much as anyone. But an artist cannot build a lasting reputation on such work. All I ask is that he leaven the lump occasionally with something that stays with you longer than a meal or a smoke. I am not asking for *Executions on the Third of May* (Goya) day in day out. I mean, even Van Gogh didn't create a *Starry Night* every week. But at the very least I think Oxborough is capable of a *Carnation, Lily, Lily, Rose* (Sargent) or a *Mending the Sails* (Sorolla). If he can do *Hot Fudge Sundaes* he can do anything. Honestly. But it is going to take some doing. Planning ahead, real model time, and the galleries off his back. You can't produce 30 *Mending the Sails* per year.

Now, *Mending the Sails* and *Carnation, Lily, Lily, Rose* aren't generally considered the deepest works in the world. But they manage their large displays of bravura technique without a note of falsity. They don't aspire to any great content, but they avoid being superficial by at least being honest and non-theatrical. They transcend illustration. They may be manufactured, but they don't look it. In short,

they have a bit of character, a character lacking in almost all contemporary realism. Sargent has always been accused of basically being a rich momma's boy, painting frivolous upper-class twits. But many of his portraits prove this to be false. The portrait of his father is heart-breaking—the man is so clearly overcome by despair. Or his pencil portrait of Vernon Lee—there is a real person there, and a real connection. *Gitana* is awash in some mysterious emotion, as are *Capri Girl* and *Carmela Bertagna*. Many will say it is unfair of me to compare Oxborough to Sargent, but notice that I am not making technical comparisons. Technically Oxborough is often very near Sargent, and there is rarely anything to complain of regardless. The comparison I am making is one of depth of character. The place to best see this is in the non-commissioned work, and that is why I have gone to Sargent's portraits of family and friends. All of Oxborough's work is non-commissioned. We are told the models are mostly family. But a viewer would never know it. I have read that his wife Jenny is in many of the works, but I couldn't say who she is. I am guessing she is the one in *Green and Gold*, but this is the only portrait that gives her more than a dead stare. In the bed and hotel scenes like *Room Service* and *The Hotel Grand* she is ragdoll, an almost anonymous lump in the white. We have no idea who she is or how the artist feels about her. She is an artistic prop, a reflector of light. He says in his [CNN interview](#) that these are napping or pre-napping poses with Jenny. Well, he needs to wake her up, and pinch himself while he's at it. Compare these works to Stieglitz's photos of O'Keeffe or Wyeth's paintings of Helga. I don't expect every artist to be as great as Stieglitz or Wyeth, but Oxborough isn't even trying. He seems satisfied with this superficial little world of room service and after-dinner drinks in Manhattan, a permanent little void where no one is really paying attention.

Which brings up another question. Where was Oxborough in the early 90's? He is the same age as Gerhartz, but Gerhartz was where Oxborough is now ten years earlier, selling out shows in the southwest with the same sort of gorgeous paint. Linda McAdoo in Santa Fe helped launch Gerhartz, and although I don't think she sold 100 paintings for him, he certainly had major buzz and made good money. On a slightly smaller scale Quast and Jan Ballew were doing the same for me. This was 1992-93, and Quang Ho was emerging strongly in Denver and Taos. And many other artists in their 20's. Where was Oxborough? According to the interview and bio, he was out of school by 23, that would be 1988. He landed a local gallery in 1995 and was discovered by Ettinger in 1998. We are told he traveled about Europe, but for seven years? I don't think so. Some will jump to the conclusion that I am implying he had a black period, was in rehab or jail or something. Just the opposite. I think he would have benefited from a black period, starving in a garret with his heart broken, fighting in the Gulf War, or strung out on methadone and twinkies. As it is, his paintings give the impression of someone who married his high school sweetheart, has never had a callous or a scar, who doesn't read, and who won't eat a carrot or a potato unless his Mom peeled it. Now, I don't wish a hard life on anyone, but even a guy blessed by good fortune might find more emotions in the world than just napping and eating hot fudge sundaes. Woody Allen, blessed in most ways, said if you live in the modern world and aren't depressed, you aren't paying attention. And if you live in NYC and aren't conflicted in some way, you must be a moron. Once again, I stress that I am not demanding angst or brutality or sordidness as proof of depth or intelligence. But there is no richness to Oxborough's beauties, and it is precisely because they seem completely untouched by sadness or pain or loss, by complexity of any kind. *A Café Named Desire* comes nearest having some sadness in it, but maybe she is just sleepy from the pose. At any



rate, that painting is more than five years old—Oxborough has since ditched even that small amount of melancholy. And compared to the painting it is probably based upon, Degas' *L'Absinthe*, it is a very weak drink.

Of course Oxborough really is the cream of his little crop at Ettinger and Albemarle, despite all this. There often isn't much to bite on, but it never bottoms out altogether, even with the cows. Even at his most bourgeois, at least Oxborough isn't painting repellent couples shopping at Tiffanys, like Iain Faulkner, or dressed in tuxedos looking at the computer, like Stuart Gatherer. Paintings like these look like a parody of Wall Street realism by John Currin or something, but I have to believe they are meant seriously. They make you question the bent of the whole gallery.

Oxborough not only has a problem with depth, he has a problem with size. Dan Gerhartz has hit us with *Hind's Feet* and *Awaiting his Return*, both of which score A's for ambition. Oxborough's largest works *Café Concert*, *In the Dressing Room*, *Dance*, *The Palace Ballroom*, and *At the Spanish Hotel* do not. They are not well-thought-out compositions, they are just large snapshots instead of small ones. *With her Dogs* (34" x 44", pictured top of this page) is probably the closest to having the sort of gravity that a larger work requires, and Oxborough has even tightened his brushwork here just a bit, which was the right thing to do. The hands and feet are lovely and the painting is successful in many other ways. But it is still not what we can expect from Oxborough at his very best, I think. The fact that he cut off that beautiful foot really bothers me, for instance. I can't forgive him for it. He wants to make us think he is daring for cropping half a foot and 1/4 of a dog, but the painting is actually fairly bland as a composition, since the lines are all square to the frame. Meaning that we are looking straight on at the bed, so that both the headboard and footboard are level, to the frame and to each other. This is the easiest way to do it, but it doesn't give him the opportunity to create any tension with the larger lines. And is this Jenny again? I think so, despite the fact that the eyes seem a bit closer and the chin a bit stronger. Could just be the raking light and the loss of one eyebrow partially hidden by the hair, plus the tighter focus. But he needs to do more than just vary Jenny's face a bit or paint her sisters. She needs to allow him to paint some other women. She's a lovely woman, admittedly, but Oxborough could stand to cast his net a bit more widely in search of a range of expressions, personalities, and heart-rending countenances. If he does this (and quits lopping off lovely limbs) someday soon he will create a large work that is as completely successful at 72" as *Gondolas* is at 8".

Another painting that seems to move in the right direction is *Repose in Black and Silver*, an anomalous work from 2000 that Oxborough probably considers a failure. Technically it isn't quite up to his latest standards maybe, but it actually strives for a strong mood. It has something of Whistler in it, I think, and it has a refreshing oddity about it. A more courageous Oxborough would allow himself more experiments like this, although I expect the directors at Ettinger will advise against it.

I have seen only one nude from Oxborough, six years ago, and it was very tenuous. This is certainly an untapped vein for him, although I again suspect that his galleries (and wife, maybe) are shooing him from it for reasons of their own. I will point out to him that he won't have to compete with Gerhartz there. At Ettinger, only Steve Huston and Malcolm Liepke are doing nudes, and there is a large gap there. I don't see Oxborough treading on either territory too much. Huston is doing faceless females with big booties and Liepke is doing the light art-deco thing.

The competition is fierce among realists in NYC, and yet, amazingly, the number of things that the artists are not doing greatly exceeds the things they are doing. As in the Santa Fe galleries in the 80's there is a flocking and a congestion. One artist finds a lucrative niche, and a hundred others suddenly sidle in that direction. A year later the flock moves away in another direction, honking and flapping. Ettinger has become the new Grand Central Gallery, and the artists are starting to inbreed again. The slick product is re-emerging and it is being streamlined for maximum sales.

And the media is beginning to abet this streamlining. As would be expected of the modern media, it does not take part as a conscious player, it is only a mouthpiece for business. In the CNN interview, we not only get to hear from the VP of the gallery (who of course is an impartial judge) we get to hear from rich clients, who have just bought themselves a mention in the paper—something their foray into art seems to have been chosen to achieve. We are told that Oxborough is being added to a collection that includes Jasper Johns, Lichtenstein and Picasso. The buyer says, "That's exactly what draws me to his work—that kind of talent." I'm sorry, what? What exactly do Johns and Lichtenstein have in common with Oxborough? The quote works as a tip-off to the precise level of artistic understanding of buyer and writer, which is zero. It is questionable whether Johns and Lichtenstein have any *artistic* talent at all, but if they do it is obviously not the *kind of talent* that Oxborough has.

None of this rubbish is Oxborough's fault, of course. He can hardly refuse to sell to people who own green targets and giant dot-cartoons (although I would). He has no control over stories hired out by the gallery. But he does have some control, one hopes, over who he paints. Does he really respect Chuck Close or is he just linking himself to famous people?\* For myself, I don't see the bloodline. It seems to me just another piece in the puzzling plan—written out beforehand—to ease the clientele over the nasty market hump between Modernism and the return to real painting. Greg Hedberg at Hirschl & Adler has led the waxing of the rails in this direction, writing at ARC about the links between Warhol and classical realism. But I have a revolutionary idea in regard to marketing realism: how about just telling the truth for once? The truth being that there is no link between Modernism and real painting. Warhol and Johns and all of "art" for the last century has been anti-art. It never hid this fact. It was never shy about it. The historical record is neither fuzzy nor old. Johns would spit on an Oxborough, which makes Oxborough's bowing toward Johns nothing but pusillanimity, even if it is done through his gallery. And Warhol's late kisses to realism are like Union Carbide's small payments to Bhopal, India, or Exxon's hosing down of the dead pelicans in Prince William Sound.

But back to the problems *within* realism. What the contemporary realists seem to have lost sight of in their competition to create the most edible paint is that they are ranking themselves on secondary concerns. Realism is currently in the grip of a technical obsession. This obsession has its roots in the eighties, when Richard Schmid and Ramon Kelley were the virtuosos of the moment. For a short time in the early 90's I too was in thrall to this obsession with slippery paint and creamy pastels. But I got past it. I soon realized that technique was just a means to an end. No amount of bravura brushwork could hide the fact that your mind was a blank slate, that your paintings were nothing and less than nothing. The southwest scene, with its oily paints and oily workshops, soon lost its charm for me. Both the paintings and the artists were disposable, as has been proved in a very short time. The galleries like a quick turnover, since younger artists are easier to manipulate, and Schmid was soon driven out. He

demanding some respect and got none, so he basically took early retirement and graduated to a life of medallions and quietude. Kelley also very soon hit a low ceiling, of his and the market's own making, and is already mostly forgotten.

I could list many other names who have followed this pattern, but it is not necessary. My point is that the market does not create hierarchies anymore, it creates flashes and phenoms. It does this because it is upside down and illogical in every way. A market that values superficiality will of course skew itself toward superficial artists, who can fill the order. It is no surprise that these superficial artists have no staying power, since that is the definition of superficiality. Most buyers don't want a powerful painting on the wall, especially in the conservative realist market, since that might lopsided the room. They want a nearly anonymous piece of decoration, one that will blend in with the furnishings while providing, at most, a small topic of conversation.

The superficial artists who provide these expensive topics have come to rank themselves strictly in terms of technique. They seem blind to the fact that technically naïve or even technically compromised paintings are often vastly more artistic than technically perfect ones. Perhaps the ultimate example of this is Rembrandt's *The Jewish Bride*. Contemporary realists would be embarrassed to have painted it. The galleries would scorn it. It is faulty in any number of ways, as a study of line or light. But it radiates tenderness and honesty. Tenderness and honesty are artistic ends. Brushwork and color and drawing are artistic means. And this is why Rembrandt is great and the superficial artists are superficial.

The figures of Corot or Chardin are another example. Although naïve and clunky by the standards of Sargent or Oxborough, these figures somehow break your heart. The artist's technique, although not refined, is completely transparent to his intention and his emotion. This is what artistic content is. This is what painting figures is about.

As a further example, I will remind you of my commentary on the ARC Salon last year. I still like Scott Burdick's painting and Nancy Fletcher's little charcoal nude, but the work that has most stuck in my mind, the painting with the most lasting power, has been Aron Wiesenfeld's *Girl with Bike*. Based on my line of commentary here, that should have been the Best of Show, without any doubt. It was the only work in the show that did much more than sit there and glitter. Let me be clear: I don't like it because it was bleak, I like it because it was *something*. I am not calling for a new ashcan school of angst and agony. I just want some honest emotional content, good or bad.

Nor am I suggesting that artists must fake a naivete or flee a refined technique. I am only saying that, whatever their technique, it must remain transparent to their intention. It cannot usurp it or overshadow it. What is more, artists must *have* an intention, and an emotion (one would think that this goes without saying, but it is now almost revolutionary to claim it). Leonardo had one of the most refined techniques in history, and yet he also invested that technique with emotion. How? By having the emotion, valuing it, and knowing that it must go in the painting, since it defined the painting. All real artists have known this, consciously or unconsciously.

Can artists like Oxborough achieve this just by recognizing that they lack it? I don't know. Maybe he needs to commit a few mortal sins, live in a tent for a year, at least do some push-ups. It is hard to say. Oxborough says in his CNN interview that he is basically proud to be bourgeois, and maybe that is OK. Chardin was bourgeois. Leonardo was a bit of a flit, by all accounts, and liked his silk sheets and

room service. I am not suggesting that Oxborough has to become a bohemian or read *Notes from Underground* or take up rugby or start wearing a hairshirt. But if we can't feel that his wife and kids are *his* wife and kids in his paintings, he needs to buy a bit of a ghost somewhere. I suppose we must leave open the possibility that his best work—in the way I mean—is in his private collection and is not for sale. His intimate portraits of his family may never make it to his galleries. All I can say is, if so, it is impossible to judge him as an artist without these paintings. Based on the paintings on the market, he could use a large dose of introspection, and might consider sharing a bit with the audience, to earn his money.

In closing, I remind the world what this little review was all about. It was about showing the world that artists have more useful information concerning art for each other, and for any possible audience, than non-artists do. I want my reviews to work as a counterweight to all the worldly advice artists get from their galleries and accountants, a counterweight to all the phony PR and propaganda and backslapping that accompanies a modern existence, a counterweight to the pressure to sell out to hackdom and to the low expectations and tepid passions of the realist market. For those whom I have offended by speaking of a fellow artist, remember that the real critics in NY and London don't even take the time to review realist works, good, bad or otherwise. We are beneath notice. They are too busy currying favor with the man to say anything to the point. An honest opinion about anything would be insubordinate. And the realist mags haven't got a substantive word to say either, since anything other than a big thumbs-up and a wet kiss would jeopardize someone's sales or advertising. But from a PR standpoint, people talking about you is always good, no matter what they are saying. It means you are worth talking about. Artists talk about each other, and if some talk in print, so what? How is that a problem? It is a problem only for the suits, who want complete control over the press. They want to hire someone to compare the young wiz to Rembrandt and to quote the vice president of sales at the gallery. Everyone else should be muzzled in the name of politeness or policy or polity.

Realism does not benefit from the critical pass it has been given. It does not benefit from the intellectual void it currently inhabits. Nor is it up to professional writers or journalists or gallery directors to fill that void. It is up to the artist themselves, who would benefit not only from rowdy café arguments, but also from serious discussions in print. The clients and galleries may want polite trysts in the window of Dean & DeLuca and CNN formula interviews that say nothing, but I remind my peers that 19th century realism—which is still mostly out of our grasp—did not reinvigorate itself decade by decade in a brightly lit chrome and enamel wasteland, over corporate coffee. Look at the bios of the artists back then and compare them to the current bios. Even the most bourgeois artists like Sargent were highly eccentric compared to the franchise people we have now, huddling at the watercooler and smiling at the boss, in mortal fear of the pink slip. This malaise can only be attacked with direct action, with a strong push in the other direction. That is what this review is.

I have mixed praise and critique here in about equal measure, which is more than any of us really deserve, including me. Compared to the reviews he gets at Art Renewal and CNN and such places, Oxborough may feel stung. But he should compare his review to my review of Jasper Johns or Bruce Nauman. I am his closest friend, in a Nietzschean sense, although I suspect he will not appreciate it for years, if ever. Let me put it this way, he is one of only about two dozen American artists (that I have

seen in person) worth looking at or expecting anything from in the future. If he weren't, he wouldn't even be worth critiquing. You can expect that my future reviews will be limited either to famous phonies, in which everything I say will be gloriously negative, or to artists who I have some hopes for, in which case I will be no harder on them than I am on myself—and probably a lot less. As an artist, I can hardly apply different standards at the easel and away from the easel.

The bottom line is that we all have more to gain from being written about by each other than being written about, or not being written about, by a pack of phony ignoramuses. One honest word from someone who gives a damn, for whatever reasons of egoism or altruism, is worth a billion words from those who do not. We are insiders and they are outsiders, though they would have the world believe the opposite. Art is ours, not theirs. It is ours to define and argue about. It is ours to love and cuddle and terrorize. The future of art belongs firstly to those who create art, not to those who only write about it or sell it or administrate it. And it belongs to painters and sculptors, not to ersatz umbrella designers and marketclowns and gorepushers. Let the institute babies and popculture mavens and the coifed and fanged scarebags and the compu-futuro-gothmogs create their many-tiered hell, cheer-led from every big-city rag on the planet. They can call their edifice art, but it will not fool the Muses. Only the Furies will care, and the Graeae, grateful for retribution. The descent is near, and may they enjoy the ride down.

We, however, have work to do, and part of that work is avoiding being lulled to sleep. For decades we achieved peace by fixing our fingers firmly in our ears, and now we are rocked to into a fatal bliss by the low ring of the cash register. The winners become as drowsy as the losers, the latter fooled into thinking they are worthless and the former fooled to thinking they are worthy. Most give up because they haven't made it, that is to say, and the rest give up because they have. If you're selling well at level 5, why look at level 6? Level 6 may not be salable. By the time you reach level 7, all your galleries will have dumped you. What to do? Listen to the lullaby and convince yourself that level 5 is the peak. Who will tell you otherwise? Who will assign you what you have left undone?

No one will but other artists. We are one another's bad conscience. The goad and the lead. We are the only possible push and pull. And the world can learn nothing about art except from us. If we don't teach, we cannot complain of pandemic ignorance. If the blind lead the blind it is because we refuse to take their hand, refuse to call out in the darkness. In part, it is true that the world has simply chosen to follow other leaders, and that choice is its own responsibility. But our silence is our responsibility and our shame. How much have we suffered of the silence of our elders, the silence of the Wyeths and the Bravos and the Annigonis? Our elders who took the money and retreated into seclusion. If we do not write or speak, then the world will listen to someone else. It cannot be otherwise. Therefore I *will* write and speak. In a poorer position to be heard than Wyeth, I am yet a thousand times more qualified than the critics and other podpeople who pull on our ears from all points on the compass. The Dantos and Careys and other ivy charlatans who have spent a full century pressing urinals and excrement upon us as fascinating finds, who have dressed their own petty and pathetic phobias and freaks in poppetclothes and danced them about our heads, singing in fine falsettos. With a wave of the arms I fling these figurines to the fires and snap my fingers like a hypnotist. Awake! Awake! Awake ye audience and arrange your clothes. Pat yourself down and take note of all your limbs. You are a man, not an airy monster, and you live under the lovely Sun who expects you to be alert. Snap to! Art history is not

some tasty mint to be passed from mouth to poison mouth ‘til it dissolve completely. It is not some shiny coin pulled from the ear of a nasty mime. It is not the hostage or whore of every red-nosed Stentor who owns a tattered thesaurus and a thumbscrew collection. Art history is the Bible and religion of true artists, a holy book you can read only after *we* have written it, a shrine you can visit only in barefeet, with your goddamned mouth shut. If you have questions, stare at the ceiling for a decade before you mail them in. Better yet, stare at the paintings and hum a little prayer to the subtle Muse. The answers are all within.

Which is to say that the journalists should be interviewing us, not the reverse. When curators lecture artists you can be sure that madness is afoot. Likewise, when galleries and clients and interior designers determine subject matter, art is set to dissolve into a misty decoration, an impression of a design of a hint of a tonal harmonic blob. In a rational world the artists would be lecturing to the galleries and curators and critics and clients. Yah, and when that happens I will be the Prince of the Alabaster Palace of Petit-Sylphs.

\*I discovered the truth later, when the National Portrait Competition hit the walls in the summer of 2006. This portrait was done for that competition, and it appears that Close was chosen to appeal specifically to the jurors. You can read my comments on the [NPC here](#).

# Paris-la-Morte



*The sum of it would be, I suppose, that they had all contrived to live through the day in that exceedingly unpleasant manner, and that nothing serious had occurred to prevent them from passing the following day likewise.—Ruskin*

My title here, which means “Paris the dead,” is a variation on *Bruges-la-Morte*, a novel by Georges Rodenbach from 1892. This short novel was a sort of precursor to and influence upon *Death in Venice*: an earlier, less evocative, less powerful version of Thomas Mann’s great novel which also took place in a city of canals. Bruges, a famous old city of northern Europe, had fallen into financial decay in the 19th century, and was little more than a large ghost town at the time of Rodenbach’s novel. It was haunted by artists and other depressive types like Rodenbach and his anti-hero Hugues. It has since enjoyed a minor financial rebirth, based on tourism, but in many ways it is still a ghost town.

Paris, however, has never seen a prolonged financial decay of this type, at least not in modern times, and many will be surprised to find me calling it dead. That is a good enough reason for asserting it, by itself, but I happen to have a fullish argument in hand as well. What sparked this essay was a re-reading of Balzac’s *Pere Goriot*, which begins with a description of an area of Paris near the Pantheon. Now, I am hardly an old man but I was able to recognize the description of squalor in those opening pages: not precisely, of course, but in a general way. I was able to do so, despite the fact that the novel took place 190 years ago, due to the fact that Paris has changed more in the past 25 years than it had in the

previous 200.

I first visited Paris in 1983, at age 19. It was near the end of a long cycling trip through Europe, and long before I ever thought of becoming a professional artist, or a countercritic, or an amateur scientist, or any of that. I knew nothing of Paris' history, was not aware of its culture or lack of it, and would have had no opinion about its future, one way or the other, beyond hoping its museums stayed open and its architecture standing (I believe this is the current opinion of most Americans and Europeans, although some of the French might add a hope concerning business).

Twenty-four years ago I first arrived in Paris by train, with no hotel reservations, no map, and no guide book. I believe there was a guide book called “Europe on \$15 a Day” at the time, but I didn’t want to waste four dollars buying the book. My routine then, as now, is just to begin walking, trusting to fate. I rather quickly ended up near the Pantheon, where I found a small room for about 60 francs (a bit more than 8 dollars). It was on the fifth floor, with no lift, a hard single bed, and the toilet down the hall. But so what? What am I, a princess? That is the kind of room I still look for, since, although I now have some money, I prefer to spend it on semi-permanent things rather than on wasteful frippery—perfumed pillows and soaps in the shape of clamshells and in-room cable TV and so on.

I returned to Paris many times after that, and although the row of cheap boarding houses and no-star rooms skirting the Pantheon disappeared sometime in the 90’s, I easily found others. I can remember thinking that Paris was nicely mixed, with cheap hotels within walking distance no matter what arrondissement you found yourself in. In this sense, there was no rich part of Paris and no poor part. Poor parts were mixed in, north, south, east and west. If you found yourself trapped in a wealthier area, you simply walked for ten minutes in any direction: soon you were out of it. For example, the Musée Rodin is now and was then in what must be called a high-traffic area. You are near Invalides and the River, near many monuments and *soi-disant* tourist attractions besides the museum itself, and yet I remember several no-star or 1-star hotels within two blocks of the museum gate. I stayed in them as late as 1996.

Between 1819, the year of the action of Balzac’s novel, and 1996, the last year of my cheap Parisian lodging, Paris underwent any number of revolutions, wars, and major overhauls. And yet, during all that time, Paris was a mixed city: “mixed” in the way I am speaking of here. It was a city of both rich and poor. Even the most central arrondissements were the homes of rich and poor citizens, rich and poor travelers alike.

But no more. Central Paris—the historical Paris and tourist Paris—has been gentrified from end to end. There is no cheap lodging in Paris, not for citizens or for travelers. The no-star and 1-star hotels are gone. The boarding houses are gone. Even near the train stations, the hotels start at \$100 a night. If you are looking for a flophouse, you had best get back on a departing train, and plan to stay on it for a while.



I was just in Paris this spring (2007), and I walked by the Pantheon, remembering my first time in the city. As I was then, I was looking for a room; but this time fate, or something more tangible, failed me. I am at least as stubborn as I was then, and I didn't go down without a fight. I walked for hours, then took the Metro to other neighborhoods and continued walking. Nothing. The City was welcoming only to the very wealthy. It wanted no artists, no young people, no one practicing any form of thrift for any reason. I finally found a 2-star hotel near the Moulin Rouge, a district I had avoided on all my other visits. It cost \$90 a night, for a double bed I didn't need and which wasn't comfortable, and bath I didn't use, and a toilet I could just as easily have walked down the hall for. And, since this was the cheapest hotel in the area, it was full of lowlife. To lodge with decent people, I suppose I would have had to spend \$200 a night or more. The people I had lodged with in 1983, in the old run-down rooms near the Pantheon, may have been poorer, but they were quieter and less sleazy. They weren't pimps or hookers: pimps and hookers in Paris aren't poor. They weren't then, and they especially aren't now.

You may think that the Moulin Rouge colored all my experiences this time, and that this accounts for the bitterness of this essay. But that is not it. I didn't spend any time watching cabarets or peepshows: I saw the windmill only from a distance—didn't even walk by, though it was a block away and within sight. As soon as I cleared the hotel door, I made a beeline for the museums and cathedrals and the River.

I fled my lodging for the street, and fled the street for the past. In the museum or cathedral, or on the edge of the River, I was no longer in the present tense. I could ignore everything real and inhabit only the dream. This was such a strange thing to do in a beautiful and famous city, and such a confusing thing to need to do, that I didn't analyze it at the time. I didn't ask myself precisely what was wrong. After my requisite museum and cathedral visits, I just wanted to get out as quickly as possible and not go back. Even the museum was no longer refuge enough; the cathedral no longer felt sacred. It began to feel like a very fancy old movie prop, convincingly lovely but sterile. The City outside beat upon the walls, peered through the windows with a silent scream. In such a predicament, one does not pose questions to the threat; one flees.

Only when I began reading Balzac last week did I begin to understand the threat, and the cause of the threat. Only then did I have the peace of mind, the distance, to consider it. Paris is dead. That is the problem. It is full of business, yes, and full of tourism, but there is no life there. Only *les salons et les bistros et les magasins de chaussures* and galleries full of non-art. The only culture there is the culture of the past, a residue of culture, the culture of ghosts. The living people created none of it, and could create none of it. They are too small. They are incapable of the art and the architecture and the literature and the poetry. They are incapable of their own history. The Parisians are tourists in their own town. They are no closer to the artifacts on display there than the Chinese tourists are. Paris is now just a relic, an overcleaned, overpolished relic. The patina has been washed away with the dirt, and the spirit was somehow in the patina.

More than that, they have destroyed any possibility of a present culture in Paris, of any rebirth. In

“cleaning up” Paris, they have “cleaned out” Paris. No one is left in Paris but high-end shopkeepers and their clients. No one can afford to live there but those who have already sold out. No one but the gilded *épicières*. You will say there are writers and artists a-plenty in Paris, but they are writers for the magazines and newspapers that the shopkeepers read, artists for the galleries that decorate the shopkeepers’ expensive flats, artists that cater to *les stylistes*. There are no independent artists or writers in Paris, worthy of the name, since there is no market for such a thing. Any art worth looking at will be sure to be an antique. Any article worth reading was written before 1910.

This was already true in 1983, for the most part, since Modernism had already been ascendant at that time for many decades. But Paris and other big cities still attracted a few young artists and writers who hoped, naively, to make it in the old ways. They could afford to rot away on some less scenic rues for a few years until their parents cut them off at last and they had to get a real job or commit suicide or something. These people are the ones that still gave the City and world its last bit of charm, its last crusting of soul. You could still meet them in the cafés, could still occasionally talk about something real. People still suffered in small ways then, had to scrape, had to worry, got in fights, got arrested, did interesting things.

Not anymore. Paris is now the most boring place imaginable. Minor political blips—the occasional stupid riot over welfare checks—is the only thing that keeps Paris from being the Brave New World, *in toto*. Of course, I am not just picking on Paris here, though Paris is the example *par excellence*. The same is true of London and New York City and Madrid and Rome and Brussels and Berlin and Munich and so on. All these cities are cities of the living dead, and they make the Bruges of 1892 seem like a paradise of emotion and life.

How do I know? I know for several reasons. One, Rodenbach calls Bruges dead because it was in financial reversion, but life does not follow a financial graph. If it did, Paris would now be full of life; if it did, the western world would be at an apex of emotional and creative energy. No, if Bruges circa 1890 was suffering and scraping by and experiencing great tragedy, of whatever kind, then at least it was *living*. At least it was storing up experience that could generate art and literature. Even at its financial worst, Bruges could evoke a novel like that of Rodenbach. Did Balzac travel to some financial oasis to find a setting for his novel, some Carmel on the sea or Palm Springs? No. He chose a highly patined neighborhood, and not because it was nearby. Who could write a novel about Paris now? Only a shopkeeper could do it, or a shallow politician. A novel of rich and clueless tourists; a novel of cappuccinos and croque monsieurs and committee meetings and buses and grey suits and pollution of all kinds. Of government agencies and paperwork and TV all the time. Of schoolkids in headphones, fashion models with cellphones, people staring dumbly into space everywhere.

I say Bruges was at its “financial” worst in 1892 for a reason, and that reason is that Bruges, like Paris, is *now* at its cultural worst, its emotional most-dead. I lived there three years and did not meet one native person who was alive. Bruges, like the rest of the “inhabited” world, is now a world of zombies. Architecturally, the city is still mostly intact. It is still beautiful beyond imagining, especially at night

when all the zombies are doubly inert in their little IKEA-appointed tombs. The swans and old trees still keep watch, the stones still whisper, the fogs still mystify, the ancient ghosts still drape the city in faded loveliness. But the Flemish people are moving only by rote, doing their business like an ant does. The only person with a personality in the entire city is an Egyptian, and he appears like Atlas, burdened almost beyond his ability by the spiritual nullity around him. Every morning he rises with a smile, every afternoon he remembers where he is, and every evening he droops, like an unwatered flower. He is like an Othello in a city of Iago's (except that Iago was no zombie, at least).

Salzburg is another prime example of this death. Like Paris, it has suffered an over-cleaning. No one is left but high-end shopkeepers. The town is antiseptic: it smells of vermicide and culturicide and articide and lificide. Everything there is insured and underwritten and guaranteed. The emotional life there is completely flat. A passion meter would register nothing. The greatest real-life event there is now a child finding an apple or a dog running at a squirrel. Anyone over 12 who feels anything deeply goes to the doctor. I hear that the Austrians can now remove an emotion like a bad molar.

And the same for Munich. As recently as 1999, I was able to find a \$20/night clean private room by my serendipitous method. Now, due to exponential tourism and the crush of the ignorant rich and semi-rich, that is impossible. It is still cheaper to travel in Europe (in most places) than in the US, but the gap is quickly closing. At least in Europe you can usually find a dorm-bed at some kind of hostel, but even these beds have become pricey. For \$20-30 a night you can listen to a dozen disgusting people snore and *pétent* and grind their teeth. Not exactly a *Room with a View*; not precisely the sort of travel that Sargent or Ruskin would have experienced in Europe.

And, as in Salzburg and everywhere else, the people of Munich have to get drunk to feel anything, and even then they can't feel anything but mildly belligerent, or mildly randy. The police won't allow more, nor the Frauen, nor the superegoen. The city has been cleansed of anything richly evocative or vulgar or elevated or sordid or poetic or poignant or otherwise artistic in any way, and in place of them have come giant neon advertisements (like those posted directly on the Rathaus). The tourists can now buy a dry bratwurst and a warm beer in a fake stein, while admiring a gigantic VISA emblem or Deutschebank insignia as their entertainment, lofted down from the face of city hall. I predict that next time I visit Munich, the little people in the glockenspiel will be wearing Nikes and playing the theme song from McDonalds.

Not to pick on the Austrians or Germans anymore than the Parisians: this vulgarization and zombification began in the US and flows out from here, like a tsunami. Or, to be more precise, it perfected itself here, reached its fruition here. It can't be said to have begun here, since nothing began here. The Modern malaise goes back to Werther, back to Christ, back to Lao-Tze, back to Akhnaton. That is, it is a combination of a lot of things, only one of which is money. But the combination is undeniably American. Paris has turned itself into a big suburban mall-town, like one of the rich-flight areas of Baltimore or Detroit. The mall in Paris is spread out over the whole city, and has no weather control, but all they need is a bubble or a dome. Then people can shop and eat and see shows without

any inconvenience. I.M. Pei's plastic pyramid outside the Louvre is just the first step in this direction, and I am not kidding when I tell you to look for the covered city in the near future. Some day they will have it, large enough for the Eiffel Tower to fit right inside. Then modern people can eat their plastic food and breathe their plastic air and spend their plastic money and shine their plastic souls, all without need of an umbrella or mittens. Only then will Paris be able to compete on an equal footing with Las Vegas.

How did it come to this so fast? Did we intend this? Ridding the world of poverty seemed like such a good idea. Cleaning up squalor seemed like such a good idea. But why is Bruges such? Why Salzburg such? Why Paris such? Can wealth alone do this? Must modern people be so sterile?

And why so many zombies? What is causing this modern phenomenon, where anyone with any kind of slightly elevated IQ seems to act like they have been hit on the head by a brick? A large minority of people act like they are traumatized, like they are semi-catatonic. The ones that are no longer fleeing voices in the air by drinking heavily, or doing piles of drugs, or by exercising every waking minute—the ones that are no longer young, that is—are lost in space, look like they are listening to some music channel on Mars. You almost have to shake them to get them to pay attention. This is what you find everywhere, not just in Paris. This is the modern person, in a nutshell. If you took away their cellphones and laptops, asked them a question that did not concern the news yesterday or today, or their narrow routine, they would lock down. Smoke would begin coming out of their ears, like Yul Brynner in *FutureWorld*.

As I look back with this in mind, I now think that the 80's film *The Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, though a remake, must turn out to be one of the most important films of the century. As a seamless bit of psychology, this film is a masterpiece of horror. But where have the pods come from, in real life? How was it possible to achieve this short-circuiting of human emotion so quickly and so perfectly, beyond even what the religions were able to achieve? How was it possible to turn Paris into FutureWorld in only a decade? How was it possible to achieve the Brave New World without aliens, without guns, without drugs in the water, without a new religion, without any of the old bogeymen?

We do have drugs in the water and lots of guns, and maybe we have aliens, too, but I don't happen to believe in those explanations. I don't even think the government has done it to us, for the most part. We have done it to ourselves, with our own choices. But how? What did we do wrong? Is it repressed guilt: are we punishing ourselves for using the third world as a sweatshop for our "democratic" opulence? I would like to think so, but I don't. Paris hasn't become a pod-city due to guilt. Europe and the US have been built on the backs of slaves of various sorts from the beginning, as have most civilizations. That is not to excuse it in the least; in fact, I believe people should feel guilty, and more, that people should quit abusing foreign labor. But it does effectively destroy the argument from guilt, since people, for all their faults, weren't sterile zombies in the 19th century. They were liars and prudes and so on and so forth, but they weren't zombies.

The same thing destroys the wealth argument, since the courts of Europe in past centuries were plagued by all sorts of moral and psychological problems, but they didn't exhibit the symptoms we are exhibiting. Louis XIV was a fat disgusting pervert, but he wasn't a zombie. He didn't build a city around him of ugly plastic, he didn't excise his emotional life like a tumor, he didn't flatten his life into a dull monotony. Just the opposite, in fact. The courts of Europe were places of true Hedonism. Modern people try to be Hedonists, but they are terrible at it. All they can do is spend money, but they can't seem to buy any enjoyment. Even when they are eating themselves sick or squirming stiffly in a pile of naked bodies, they still act like they are listening to the cataleptic channel. The modern person has found a way to make even an orgy flat and boring, looking to a script to see when to moan.

So what is it? What did we do wrong? *We have over-socialized ourselves.* We moved into the cities, lived on top of each other, talked too much, made too many rules, went to school too long. Now we have added TV and the internet to that, and we are over-saturated, like an ant that has eaten too much apple cider. We are permanently buzzed on society, and cannot turn off, or even turn down, the superego. The superego is hypertrophied, constantly flexed like some strange bodybuilder, and the instincts are crushed under its bulk. We hear a constant patter of "I can't do that" or "I must do that". That is the cataleptic channel. The orders are so constant and so loud and so contradictory that the body and mind simply shut down at last. If we are not in some brainless routine, we are lost.

Only in this state can we be so blind as to do what we are doing: turning Paris and the world into a strip mall, an ugly, polluted, car-infested and car-encircled and car-determined nightmare where all is false and all is monotonous and all is droning.

We need the car nearby at all times, not because we have anywhere to go but because the car is a perfect shell, even better than the bed. Unlike the bed, it has knobs within reach that supply most all our cut-switches. If our instincts get too noisy or insistent, we can turn up the radio, rev the engine, light a cigarette. But most important, we can fly. Motion gives us the impression that we are leaving something behind—please let it be the cry of my instincts, which I cannot indulge! The bed cannot do this. It is not a magic carpet: there are not enough knobs, not enough lighted dials to bewitch us there fully. And most of us can't sleep anyway, since sleep is the realm of instinct, where our superego loses power. The superego resists this place as a diminished sphere of influence. What if I should have a dream that someone else might be offended by? Also—and this is of paramount importance—the bed is the locus of sex. To the superego, it is a cursed place for this reason alone. Better to sit in the car with the radio and the pretty dashboard—and the engine, in case I need to physically flee.

Music is the other cut-switch, of course. All places are now plugged or batteried, for immediate sounds. When I was traveling in Ireland this winter, a young hosteller asked me how I could travel without my "tunes." I might as well try to travel without my blanky or my thumb, in his opinion. Everyone else had the ipod glued to their person, of course, just below the cellphone (we will count the cellphone as music, since it serves the same purpose). Both act as a flight from self, a flight from reality, a flight from instinct, an immediate confirmation of the superego, a near-constant stroking. A piped-in hum and

blowjob from Big Brother and Big Sister and all our MTV heroes. An instantaneous short-circuiting of any whispers from within. A drowning-out of all the old Muses and nymphs and other natural motions bubbling up from deep.

Shopping is another cut-switch, and it goes a long way to explaining Paris and all the other cities and towns of the world. Shopping and sight-seeing and going to shows and films and museums is just one more blow to the instincts. Like the dashboard in the car and the cigarette lighter and the knobs and the radio and the rev of the engine and the ipod and the cell, the modern city is a distraction from the instincts. The shops are the superego made into rooms and galleries and salons. Filled with other people and things made to please other people, shops glorify and exercise the superego at the same time. Simultaneously, the superego is flexed and the instincts are drowned out. That is why most people don't want to look at nudes in a museum, and don't want to buy nudes in a gallery: someone might see them doing it. They don't want to see them in movies either, except in brief teasing passes that they can claim later they missed or that were only there "as part of the plot." The dark helps hide things, too, in the theater. In sexy parts, you can pretend the other people aren't there.

People don't even want to be seen shopping for many things, and—though you might assume the opposite at first—this is more true of guys than girls. Girls will go into the men's section without too much trauma, but you should see guys skirting the women's section, as if it contained male-targeting landmines. The superego has become so overpowering that men, in a time of ubiquitous porn, still cannot pass by a display of ladies underwear or stockings without glancing around furtively to see if anyone caught them. "Did that lady think I was looking at those pictures as I walked quickly by, seeking the men's room? Do you think she thinks I am hard up? Look at her grabbing her daughter and rushing off in the other direction. I better get out of here before a guard comes!" This is not a joke; this is what actually happens everyday in every mall in the world. Like a brave advance scout, I often have to reconnoiter in the women's section, looking for clothes for my model closet, so I have experiences that most other guys don't. I see the other guys passing quickly, looking at me inquisitively, wondering if I am boldly gay or just suicidal. And I see the women looking at me sideways, checking to see if I am with a girl (you really need a female guide if you are going to advance this far into enemy territory). I always say I am looking for a birthday gift for my girlfriend, and this seems to diffuse the bomb better than anything. But it is strange I should need to lie. It is strange I should need to say anything. Girls in the men's section don't need to come up with some cover story (everyone knows they are there buying boxers). Guys are happy to have a few girls around, no matter where we are. We are not territorial about the men's section at all. We don't ask questions. If you want to park it in our section, come on over, and bring a keg!

But seriously, it is the superego that rules the mall, and the mall is a very strange place, just like Paris. Like Paris, it is ruled by women—since the superego is at least 75% female. In all shopping situations nudity is heavily proscribed, surrounded by layers of restriction and taboo. When it is allowed in a shopping situation, it is aimed at women, and only women can look at it. Think of the underwear section or the window at Victoria's Secret. Guys can't stand outside VS and stare, although I am not

sure why not. In a natural world, guys would be strolling through VS at all times: “We just came in to look at your beautiful posters. Wow. Maybe we’ll buy something, too. Hey Johnny, do you think Laura would like these? I think I’ll get them for her.” That may happen occasionally, and VS would probably like for it to happen more, but, honestly, most guys are scared of VS. You never see guys in there, unless they are holding close to their ladies, and even then they look very uncomfortable. Does this seem sexually liberated to you? It doesn’t to me. It is a very clear sign, one that is fabulously easy to read.

For the same reason, people do not want nudes in their homes. The home, like everywhere else, has become a public place, ruled by the superego. The neighbors would see the nude painting and what might they say? The kids will see it, the parents will see it, the UPS man will see it, Santa Claus will see it. Oh My God!

Until recently, the Europeans were a little more honest about nudity in the theater and home: they did not limit nudity in mainstream movies to half-second clips, for instance. But as Paris has become like suburban Baltimore with more cupolas, the Parisian or French film has become more like the American film. More action, more camera angles and cuts, less lingering nudity and more split-second teases.

Since the Europeans are not moving in this direction for religious reasons, as might be urged for Americans, we must assume the instincts are being lopped there for other reasons. The reason is simply *to satisfy the superego*. The superego doesn’t like the instincts, and this has nothing to do with any religion. It is a turf war and nothing else. The more the instincts are cut out, the more powerful the superego is. Any socialization, religious or not, will denigrate the instincts, since the brain is a zero-sum game. If the superego wants a bigger piece of the pie, it must co-opt mental territory from the id. It will do this in any way it can.

This is why the city, the TV, the radio, the internet, and all other social grids look like they do now, why they are looking more and more that way every year: they are constructs of the superego. The superego is not artistic, is not sexy, is not creative, and is not complex. It is jealous and ambitious, in the shallowest possible way. The superego has all the depth and potential depth of a formica countertop. Once it seeds an appreciable part of the mind, it is like kudzu. It takes great effort to tear it out. It either requires a very directed energy, an energy that most people cannot manage themselves, even once they recognize the need for it; or it requires an extended period of starvation and drought. It requires the proverbial trip into the wilderness. Not a weekend vacation with the kids, but several years of being alone, without media of any sort, without any “thou shalts” or cries for charity or goods or bads from anyone for any reason.

I must mention one other factor in the death of Paris, a factor suggested by a passing comment above. There I said that the superego was 75% female. I will now try to expand a bit more on that, letting the expansion stand for—not so much proof as confirmation. I will not have time to *prove* anything here, since this is a very big can of worms, admittedly. But it does bear suggesting, even if I say no more

than that I think it is true: I see a connection between the housecleaning done on Paris and the ascending power of women in western culture. The old Paris was like a man's studio: dirt piled in the corners, loads of dirty laundry rotting in the basement, dishes everywhere, rubble dotting the mews, but masterpieces in between, shining through. The new Paris is like a woman's studio, everything in its place, clean and tidy, well organized, scented, and perhaps a bit sterile. In the man's studio, you might find any number of odd fellows and lasses lounging about, and you would be unclear on the purpose of many of them. Were they models, clients, friends, neighbors, or just bums? In the woman's studio you won't see any bums or unsavory lasses—she will have sent them packing. No messes either. Just well-dressed, clean people who all have a clear and present purpose, much of which will be talking about things.

But the man knows there is a use for messes, and for bums and lasses of all sorts, too, although he may not be able to put it into words. These masterpieces don't arise accidentally out of the dross, they *require* the dross. Every mountain is surrounded by slag. The old Paris was like Rodin's studio; the new Paris is like Hillary Clinton's office.

The housecleaning that has been done on Paris is also like the traditional married couple, where the wife, pushed past her level of patience, invades the husband's ratty wardrobe and burns the lot; or goes into his shop and composts everything she doesn't see an immediate use for.

On a level of even greater generalization and cliché (I fully realize) is the fact that nice hotels were made mainly for women. A lot of guys are like me, and don't give a rat's thingamabob what kind of room they stay in while they travel. Very few women are like that. Clamshell soaps and perfumed pillows were not invented to impress guys, in the main. As in every city, 90% of the shopping is done by women, which must mean that guys exist in Paris mainly as a subspecies. I don't know what men do in big cities, or any cities, except work and drink beer. A large part of Paris is just a wall to stand outside of while waiting for a woman. Numerically I could prove this with any poll or any documentary, of either tourist couples or local couples. I am a people watcher, and I know how statistics work.

So before you write to me in some sort of huff, I know that a lot of guys now shop for frilly froufrou, colognes and pointy shoes and pomades and whatnot. And I know that a lot of women are tough as nails, with big muscles and pigsties for homes and growly cars. They will tell me they prefer to ride their Harleys to work at the prison, sleep in garbage cans, and make art out of roadkill they have dented themselves. But even admitting all that, my point remains, since it was made as a generalization and is true as a generalization. Paris looks like it was planned by the most ambitious and least artistic Junior League lady, and this type of Junior League lady exists, whether you happen to be one or not. Wives and girlfriends *do* still throw out their husbands' or boyfriends' clothes. It is a cliché precisely because it happens so often and is so representative of . . . something. Also representative of the same something is the fact that boyfriends and husbands would not dare to throw out anyone's clothes. They would never think to do it, in the first place; and then, if they did think of it, they would resist the urge,



for any number of reasons which must come immediately to mind.

Paris, is, in fact, full of women just like the ones I am talking about here, and it is no accident that their homes and Paris as a whole look more and more alike. It is no accident that Paris and all of Europe has succumbed to the unsubtle cleaning of this Hausfrau. You, my gentle reader, may be the most advanced sort of woman imaginable, artistic to the nth degree and progressive by every possible standard; but Paris is not being redone by you. It is being redone by plastic ladies in too much makeup and perfume, wearing ridiculous shoes, driving expensive cars and drinking overpriced bottled water. And, yes, perhaps their husbands and lovers are fully complicit, riding with them, drinking the bottled water, wearing the makeup, maybe even wearing the perfume. But it is now the men being like the women, and not the reverse, that is the problem.

Some will say, so what? So what if the wife throws out the ratty pants with holes in them or rustles out the bums or shoos away the slutty lasses? So what if the rubble is cleared and the dishes done and the streets swept? So what if there is a mint on the pillow? We have the money, why not have a shower in the room and clean towels and a TV to watch? Who wants a bunch of obnoxious artists next door anyway, or a lonely old writer, slouching around, depressing everyone, littering the foyers with his books? Do we really need slag around the mountain? Can't we vacuum it up, if we have a big enough machine?

These I will never convince, since being an artist is not finally a gender issue or a necessary sex trait, it is an instinct, like the other instincts that are being sat upon. Some people can see the loveliness in a patched pair of jeans or a faded t-shirt and some can't. Some people can appreciate the smell of a slept-in bed or a worn leather shoe; others must reach for the Lysol. To some an old pile of stones is a temple, to others it is rubble that needs to be hauled off. To some, old things are richly evocative of a cherished past; to others they are just junk, outmoded and useless. To some, a few minor dents is a thing to call "antiquing"; to others it is nothing but damage, to be reported to an insurance agent. To some, a life of great pains and joys is not only grist for a novel or a painting, as with Balzac or Tolstoy, it is grist for our own nightly dreams, grist for heaven, a drink for the soul itself; for others such a life is a nuisance, a string to be straightened, a graph to be flattened, a ride to be leveled. These people see nothing provocative or compelling in dirty feet, rumpled and fragrant beds, well-worn tools, riotous vines, long hair, old books, cracked walls, untamed rivers, unkempt paths, unbaubled nudes. For them, all these things need trimming and scrubbing, relining and draping. For them everything should be named and packaged, defined and categorized, wrapped and put away. For them, life is preferable when it is lived in a sort of second-hand way, at a distance, critically, for this is how the superego wants it. When you are living your life as if it belonged to another person—another person far far below you, shiny and simplified and automatic, almost to the point of being inert—then you are living right.

I have been asked how I have avoided this zombification. How have I avoided the Modern good life? One, I haven't avoided it, fully. I spend many hours catatonic (though possibly for other reasons). Two, I was never very well socialized. Large parts of my youth were spent in a mental wilderness, after

school, alone, staring at the ceiling instead of “partying.” Three, I have directed great energy at the kudzu. I recognized it early on as dangerous, and I still attack it daily, sort of like my daily attacks on plaque with my toothbrush. Four, my adult life has contained long spells in the wilderness, alone and seeking various superego starvations on purpose. The kudzu doesn’t find very fertile ground in my mind.

But why do I mention myself here? Not only as the nearest specific example I could offer, but as an analogue. As with the mind, so with the city. Paris must be analyzed much like I have analyzed the mind here, and my own mind. That is to say, it is not so much that Paris has lost its squalor that is important. I am very far from arguing for squalor *qua* squalor—Balzac didn’t choose Maison Vauquer just to throw a fistful of dirt in our eyes. If I were arguing for that, I might as well argue for Lucian Freud’s manufactured squalor, created specifically to damage the retina. No, what is important is that Paris has lost its richness and complexity. The instincts cannot live there; the id is not welcome. The superego has hosed down all the sidewalks and rebuilt all the walls and repainted every crack and removed every natural thing. Yes, a sort of sex-like thing exists there, as at the Moulin Rouge and in the bordellos surrounding, but it is squashed by the superego that rules the city. It is a depressive and unnatural and sickening sex, rustling like the last rats in the sewers. It is not an instinct that has been allowed its course, it is an instinct that has been redirected through various backwaters of the soul. No, it is not even that. The superego has constructed a sex-substitute, a vulgar mannequin, a look-alike, a painted rubber doll, a *putain plastique*. Like the poor lab monkey, we have been given a small piece of pile carpet instead of a mother, and we cling to “her” pathetically. The superego has nailed together a wooden dummy and hung a “sex” sign around her neck, but the instincts are nowhere and in noway represented or satisfied.

As with sex, so with all other richnesses and complexities and subtleties and emotions and passions. In its housecleaning, the modern brain and city has swept the greater part of the mind and soul out the door. It has done this in the name of health and wealth, *fraternité et égalité*, but it had oversimplified the problem, and thereby come to the wrong solution. For instance, it may be that the city does not need less dirt, but more. It may be that the city does not need less sex, but more. It may be that the city does not need more people, but less. It may be that the city does not need more business, but less. It may be that the city does not need more traffic, but less. And less media, and fewer laws, and fewer taxes, and fewer shops, and fewer rights, and less talk, and more sleep.

In this sense, it may be that people know that they need to tune out, turn off, but they are doing so in pathological ways. Not in the way of Tim Leary, with drugs, but with unconscious catatonic and cataleptic states. They cannot figure out how to solve this problem in a rational way, since, what are you going to do, outlaw more laws? How do you rebuild, or un-build, society without talking to other people? You would appear to need media to downsize media. You would appear to need media to educate people on the need for less media.

At this point, the brain simply shuts down. The problem has entered a loop. In addition, no one has

time to go into the wilderness, so instead they create little spaces of wilderness in each day, going into a zombie-state in between each task, like a computer idling. Eventually the system will crash, they think, and then they can turn back on and rebuild from the ashes. You cannot turn a Juggernaut; best let it sink and then build another ship from new timbers.

Possibly this is the best way, and probably this is the way it will pass, but I am not convinced of the logic of it, or the necessity. It would be much easier to turn Paris a few degrees than rebuild her from the ashes, to downsize rather than upsize and upsize until the balloon pops. What is wrong with letting a little air out? I am too in love with Paris and Bruges and all the rest to desire their utter destruction, especially when this desire would appear to come from the lazy refusal to face facts. It is like saying, "I haven't got time or expertise to hit the brakes, since my feet hurt and the kids are screaming. Besides, the radio is broken in this stupid car. Best let it crash and then I will see about fixing it tomorrow." If you are driving a 1973 Gremlin, and you are assured of surviving the wreck, with your kids, then yes, maybe you have made the right decision. But if you are driving a vintage Corvette, loaded with options, and if two of your three kids aren't even wearing seatbelts, I should think you would find a way to tap on those brakes, no matter how tricky they are.

## *Graydon Parrish and the 911 Memorial*



*by Miles Mathis*

When Graydon's work was first unveiled I promised myself I wouldn't make any public commentary on it. So much for that. Graydon is one of the few people in the world who I do not relish having as an enemy. Not because I am afraid of him or because he is such a close friend, but simply because I respect him. In fact, Graydon is *not* a close friend. Although we are both native Texans, and although we lived about a block from each other in Massachusetts for four years, I have never met him or spoken to him in person. We have exchanged a few short emails and that is it. I like him, as far as one can tell from such things, but I don't think a few emails makes a friendship, close or not. I am sharing these personal facts with my readers so that they may take this critique as an objective one. I don't want anyone to think that what I am about to say is a defense of a bosom buddy. It is not. As you will see, it is basically another all-out assault on Modernism, and Graydon's experiences after the unveiling—to the small extent I know them—are used simply as starting point for my commentary, not mainly upon him, but upon those around him in this minor circus.

As everyone knows who has read more than a couple of my papers, I don't like politics or allegory in art. As some know who have combed my site carefully, I am also a 911 Truther—meaning, I strongly believe that everything that happened on 911 was planned and carried out by our own government. For these reasons, among others, there was no pleasing me with this 911 Memorial. Nothing that Graydon could have done would have pleased me artistically. If he had gone after the CIA and the neocons and the Pentagon like a Berserker, showing the crime in all its heinous detail, it might have pleased me politically, but it still would not have pleased me artistically. I don't like to see art used that way. Art, in my opinion, is too good for that. Leave that to the papers, which were created for reportage.

However, none of that is really to the point in this case, which is why I haven't had anything to say about the Memorial until now. Graydon was hired to paint this Memorial by someone who wanted a memorial, not an attack piece. They didn't want a grand statement, a crusading documentary, or a hook for a revolution. They wanted a memorial painted by a talented realist, and they got that. I imagine they are pleased as punch. If they are not, then I imagine it is mostly their own fault for not being more specific about what they *did* want.

[Two things I do like, politically, and I will pop them in here. One, the crumpled up Constitution, for obvious reasons. Two, the title, *The Cycle of Terror*. I like that word "Cycle," which has not been given enough attention. Think about it. Graydon may be doing a bit more here than most people know, more even than the annotation will admit to. Concerning other parts of the Memorial that may now seem a bit naïve to some, we must remember that Graydon began this painting soon after 911, when we were all a bit more naïve. The last five years has been a time of great change, politically. The Constitution was likely added to the painting at later stages, for example, and the title could wait till the end. So if some parts of this Memorial are more iconoclastic than other parts, it should not come as any surprise to us.]

No, what led me to write this is the asinine response to the 911 Memorial by the media. It is not anything that Graydon did that pissed me off, it was the writers once again. I have read critiques from all quarters, from the predictable slurs of the avant garde mouthpieces like the *New York Times*, to the nearly-as-predictable slurs of the rightist journals, such as *The New Criterion*. Not one of them has the slightest hint of a historical perspective. Reading them, you would think that this was the only painting that had ever been attempted in the history of the world, and that the history of the world began about ten minutes ago. Meaning, they are all perfectly willing to lash into the painting for any good or bad reason, but not willing to look around and compare it to all the other so-called art surrounding it for the last century. None of the critiques I have read have compared Graydon's work to any pre-Modern works either, history paintings or allegories or political paintings or memorials, except in the most cursory way. They have implied, with no argument or direct comparison, that it doesn't hold a candle to the great paintings of the past. But even if that were true (and I don't think that it is) it would be horribly unfair. When Louise Bourgeois or Bruce Nauman unveils her or his latest little piece of faux-afflatus, we do not see the critics setting it next to *The School of Athens* or the *Raft of the Meduse* and pooh-poohing for pages. Graydon's painting was just painted, and as a new painting it deserves some benefit of the doubt, some minor amount of empathy. That is to say, before it is looked at in competition with Apelles and Michelangelo and Tintoretto and David, it should be looked at as a contemporary artifact, a contemporary creation. It should be compared to the other art around it. If it is looked at in that way, it is immediately Olympian in comparison.

For instance, James Cooper of the Newington Cropsy Institute was quoted on NPR as saying that Graydon was not Raphael (which he pronounced like Raffy-L: isn't that a rapper?). Yah, well, no one claimed he was, least of all Graydon. And I have some shocking news for you, Mr. Cooper, neither was Jasper Cropsy. Jasper couldn't paint the figure at all, he was just another landscapist. Why is it,

precisely, that you can promote Jasper and not Graydon? One suspects that it must have something to do with something besides this Raphael rubbish. [More on that suspicion below.] Greg Hedberg at Hirschl&Adler pretended he was too good for the new realists for a while, too, saying that he was “waiting for them to mature,” or something like that. Really infuriating, considering the “mature” things Mr. Hedberg was promoting before we came along. But Mr. Hedberg changed his mind once it was clear that we could sell for big prices: Graydon was, and I believe still is, showing at H&A.

The response from the left has been much like Mr. Hedberg’s: they pretend they are too good for realism, when, as everyone with the requisite number of eyes knows, they aren’t good enough. Grace Glueck at the NYT dismissed the 911 Memorial as “a pompous piece of stagecraft”, for instance. A great artist in the 19th century might have had the standing to make some such comment, true or not, but Ms. Glueck has no such standing. Besides the fact that, artistically, she is a complete nobody and non-entity, she has spent her time up to now jabbering about work that attempts to be nothing, neither stagecraft, good or bad, nor learned, pompous or not, nor anything else. It is pretty easy to avoid criticism like hers, simply by buying into the hyper-democratic milieu she helps to sell, and offering up nothing except the tiny and pinched and humble, the social and the pitiful, the pathetic and the phony. We all know that no grand gesture of any kind or from anyone could have passed her various Modern tests, since these tests were created specifically to make broad dismissals like hers possible, with no need for argument or discussion. By the current standards, any skillful realistic depiction can be waved off with a sneer, whether it comes from Cimabue or Veronese or Leonardo himself.

The response from the left has been completely predictable, as I said: the last thing they want to see in art is any return to standards, talent, or a hierarchy based on any definable thing—that would force them into another field overnight. They have to keep playing their little games of misdirection and psychology, hoping to fool the real artists into cutting their own throats for another decade. But the response from the right, although not shocking in any way, is both illogical and disappointing. Even those that feel this is only a step in the right direction should be embracing Graydon with giant hugs. Even if it is not exactly what they were looking for in their stockings this Christmas, that is, it is still a gift of such major proportions they should never stop extolling it. This is precisely the sort of painting that should be vastly oversold in the media, if anything; and yet it has been vastly undersold, caviled and gift-horsed to an extent that can only be called tragic.

None of these educated or uneducated commentators can seem to see past their own tongues. They are like the wolf living in the winter den, surviving long months on worms and bark and bone marrow, who is thrown a steak by a passing ranger, and who turns his nose up at it because it is cow instead of the preferred reindeer. The ranger, seeing the wolf sniffing and snuffling, is tempted to yell, “It is grade-A prime, you fool. The long winter has affected your brain, you are vitamin deficient and have lost your way. Eat it and begin the long road back to health!”

No matter what else it is, Graydon’s work is grade-A prime. If you don’t like memorials to 911 or AIDS, hire him to do something else. He has done lots of lovely smaller work, but if you require giant

canvases and big themes to be impressed, yoke him to your pet theme and see how he does. If he fails to fill your order, you can criticize him then, but not until then.

And if you think that all artists who take work for hire are whores, then I guess you can dismiss out of hand Michelangelo, Leonardo, Raphael, Rubens, Van Dyck, Goya, Rodin, Picasso, and just about every other great artist in history.

Rather than drone on and on about what shortcomings the work may or may not have, based on your narrow prejudices, why not look at what the work does right, by any fair assessment? To begin with, as a mural or memorial, it all hangs together. It is successful as a whole: meaning, it is visually convincing. None of the figures are drawn or painted poorly, none of them jump off the canvas or fail to sit in the background. The finish of the piece is consistent from corner to corner, and all the parts of the painting visually support all other parts. Technically, the piece is nearly flawless. This is not a small thing to say, in this day and age. What other large work could you say this about? It is difficult to find another 20th or 21st century analogue, to even begin the comparison—one of equal size and ambition. It can't really be compared to anything by Diego Rivera, for instance, except in size, since Rivera never attempts this sort of realism. Rivera's murals are pieced-together allegories, painted in a somewhat naïve mural style (purposely). I am not criticizing Rivera here, understand, just stating a fact. Graydon, on the other hand, has attempted a realistic whole here, with no elisions, no gaps, no fade-outs. That is damned difficult to do on this scale, and he has done it to near perfection. All his figures are completely worked into the background, to the highest academic standards, and the background is likewise finished, corner to corner. We don't have the normal faded-out background, or vignetted background, or slapped-in mural background; we have a fully developed background, as in an easel painting (in fact, this is a very large easel painting, free-hanging, and framed, not a mural—it is a mural only in size).

Technically, Graydon's thematic works are also clearly superior to Maxfield Parrish, Rockwell, Ives Gammell, and anyone else you could mention from the 20th century. Graydon's work may be too "real" for some, but his work looks much less like a photo than his competition here. About the only contemporary things that really bear technical comparison are Odd Nerdrum's largest canvases, but I don't think even Nerdrum has done anything on this scale. As with Rivera, I don't intend to compare Graydon to Nerdrum, since, beyond ambition and technical mastery, there isn't much to compare. They aren't even running on the same racetrack. But my point is the same: by certain standards, Graydon has attempted and successfully completed a task here that hasn't been completed in a long, long time. Credit must be given where credit is due. To create a visual whole on this scale is extremely difficult, and there aren't a handful of people that could do it, whatever the theme or intention. Of those handful, only Graydon has actually done it so far, with nearly perfect technical success.

Graydon's painting is also nearly flawless as a piece of color, and this is just as rare as his other accomplishments. Murals tend to be gaudy and glaring, and the same can be said of most modern works, political or not. 99 out of 100 artists, realists as well as Moderns, appear to me to be colorblind, or nearly so. But like all of Graydon's work that I have seen, this one is pitch-perfect. The colors are

accurate and realistic; but it is much more than that, since many realistic and accurate colors are jarring and unattractive. Graydon knows how to choose a palette, and color combinations and juxtapositions that are both convincing and beautiful. Not beautiful as in, “Oh, isn’t that a beautiful bright red, hitting me in the eye like pure paint squirted from a tube!” But beautiful as in, “Everything is subtly appealing, but I am not sure why, without analyzing it. None of the tones or colors seems too much or too little, that is all I can say right now.”

The composition is also perfect. By that I don’t mean as content, but as weight. Some have used the “composition” heading to attack Graydon’s choice of models, but what I mean is that the position and direction of everything is correct. Choice of models should be addressed under the heading “content”, and, as I said, I won’t go there since I was prejudiced on content from the beginning. Choice of model will determine mood, and Graydon’s mood was determined in large part by his client. There are a majority of things he simply couldn’t have done, given the commission, so that criticizing him for not doing them is pointless. You can blame the US for being the US, but there is no reason to hoist all that blame upon Graydon’s shoulders. In terms of composition, however, the piece is completely successful. As with his other major work, on the theme of AIDS, the whole large painting here is perfectly balanced, and all parts are balanced, in weight, direction, color, tone, value, and darkness. Once again, this is no small thing. No one else has done it on this scale for decades.

Beyond this, Graydon has been critiqued for being too academic, too slick, too perfect, too real, blahblahblah. You might expect me to make the same criticism, since I like things a bit more messy in my own work. But I refuse to make it. When I paint my own political mural, I can do it my own way, with models who please me and paint that flies around the way I like it and so on. But as a critic who is trying to be objective, I am not free to just pass off all my prejudices as facts, as these critics of Graydon are doing. What seems to me more to the point on this particular topic of finish and style is that both the right and the left seem to be demanding relevance from realism. Well, there are a lot of artists who like this style, and a lot of buyers, too. A lot of people in this democracy of ours find this style compelling, for various reasons. By the modern definition of relevance, this is relevant. If art is now not a mirror of nature, but a mirror of society, then the success of Graydon’s style, both with artists and clients, must be seen as part of that mirror. That is to say, according to the rules that currently pertain in art, Graydon’s painting is not just a personal artifact, it is a social artifact. He had to have been affected by the expectations around him, by his environment. Therefore his realistic style, precisely as it differs from the realistic style of Raphael or Rubens or Leighton, must be significant.

Modern intellectuals can deconstruct nullities for days on end, but they cannot look at a genuine complex artifact (especially if it is created by someone who is competing for media attention with them, and who has not signed some contract with them) for more than a few seconds without finding some reason to throw it in the recycle bin. Now, I am not really interested in deconstructing anything. Everyone knows that I don’t believe in the modern definitions of art. But if the critics ascendant on either the left or the right currently had any consistency at all, had any connection to the theories they constantly espouse, they would have to look at Graydon’s work in a completely different way. The fact



that they are so ready to dismiss it betrays some pretty transparent psychology of their own [again, more on that mystery below].

But does the Memorial create the proper mood, or any strong mood? This is impossible to answer, except as each individual person answers it for himself. *Guernica* is the most famous 20th century painting in this line, being a war memorial of similar dimensions, but I have always found *Guernica* absurd. Whenever I have seen it in person, I have always laughed outloud. I find it amusing, and I don't mean that sardonically. I mean that it makes me laugh like a funny cartoon. In fact, it is a funny cartoon, and only the fact that others try to make it something else causes the situation to graduate to the absurd. In this honest feeling, however, I know I am outvoted 100 to 1, or maybe a million to 1. Most other people find their own ways to be deeply moved by Picasso's painting. My point being, I guess, that Graydon or any other artist creating a public monument would be a fool to take my personal tastes into consideration, since, in doing so, he would impress one person and offend a million others. A successful war memorial or memorial to other tragedy must play to a large audience, not just an audience of top artists or critics. In taking a commission like this, an artist must consider his client's wishes first, the public's mood second, and the opinion of future historians a distant third. The opinions of over-educated eggheads like me and Hilton Kramer and Peter Schjeldahl don't even come into it. It is well to remind everyone involved of this, not least Graydon himself, who has been hurt by these narrow criticisms. Graydon weighed out these priorities before he began, and he probably weighed them right: he must stick to them. The critics have always been superfluous, from their opinions on Keats' odes to their opinions on Whistler's nocturnes and Holman Hunt's Jesus to their opinions on Rockwell and Wyeth. This 911 Memorial wasn't painted to impress the eggheads on either side, so why should Graydon care that it doesn't?\*

The proper critics for an *ars gratia artis* easel painting are not necessarily the proper critics for a public monument. Not that there are any proper critics (a good critic is no critic), but in the case of a public monument like this, a middle-America commentary—a sort of Siskel and Ebert thumbs-up—would be more useful to magazine readers or internet surfers than an ivory tower critique from those who are invested heavily in the arguments of art one way or another. Great artists generally do their best personal work when they are painting only for themselves, or for a couple of other artists whose opinion they trust, or for some ghosts of dead artists they are trying to impress. But this 911 Memorial is not a personal work. It is a very public work, and that has to be taken into consideration. None of the critics so far have taken that into consideration. They have made no attempt to look at the piece from the public point of view. We must remember that Graydon had the public point of view in mind from the beginning, as he should. Therefore it can only fail or succeed from that public point of view. If he had been interested in impressing only himself or a couple of ghosts, he wouldn't have taken the commission in the first place. If he had set out to impress art critics, we could only call him a fool. No, to discover his success, we must ask the public—this is a *public* monument, after all.

Like the wolf, the commentators on the right have starved themselves into a corner. For them, Modernism is a dead-end, but, because they don't want to be seen as completely "out of it," they have accepted, consciously or unconsciously, important parts of the Modernist program. They don't want to go forward with Modernism on its current tack, but they don't want to go back. They want skill but they also want astounding relevance at all times, by the modern definition. And they will dismiss any realism that does not immediately trump all previous realism (as Modernism claimed to immediately trump all previous art). Hence the absurd comparisons to Raphael. They expect craft and novelty simultaneously. Despite knowing full well that craft in art just underwent a century of obsolescence, they judge new realism by higher standards than old realism. A technical mistake in Rembrandt or Chardin or Goya is easily overlooked, for instance; a similar mistake by a new realist is cause for full dismissal. Many are so keen to prove their knowledge and taste that they can be pleased by nothing. Others let the contradictions listed just above lead them into astonishing lapses, such as Hilton Kramer mistaking Odd Nerdrum's art as earnest, or Robert Hughes doing the same with Lucian Freud [both Nerdrum and Freud gave the market what it wanted—weirdness—and they did so from a burning desire to succeed. Freud was much better at selling out to the in-crowd, but Nerdrum got it right at last.]

By these standards, there is no future, no hope. The dead-end of the right is just as dead as the left, since although the right appears to have a program based on statable standards, as at *The New Criterion*, there is no hope of realizing it. Not because it is so high or puissant, but because it is contradictory and confused. Kramer's ideal leads him somehow to Nerdrum, so how consistent can it be? Other critics would serve up someone like Bravo, who paints paper packages: how is this preferable to Graydon in any way? And as Hughes has moved right—trying to take Freud with him—he has lost all his air (which was quite a deflation). He can almost visibly be seen bashing his head against a wall, the very wall I am talking about. He wants craft, but doesn't want any derivation or historical reversion or political backsliding: he wants a new Leonardo to arrive, fully formed, and updated in all the right ways at once—and he wants this Leonardo to come to him and bow down and ask for anointment from him, the critic. Good luck, Sir.

Kramer and Hughes and all the rest of these lazy critics won't get in the car or do a websearch, won't look at people like Graydon until they are served up hot by the *New York Times* or the *London Times*, by Nicolas Serota or Phillippe de Montebello, and even then won't give them a fair shake. If Graydon doesn't instantly outstrip Goya and Velasquez combined, sprinkled with the "relevance" of Bacon, then they think it best to return to their whining about Hirst or the Chapman Brothers.

The logical response to Graydon is to give him a pass on the subject. If you like it, fine, say some nice things. If not, wait for the next subject. You wouldn't have liked all of Gericault's subjects as they came out each year, or Goya's, or Chardin's, or Picasso's, or whoever you like. But, for heaven's sake, try to see the bigger picture, which is precisely this: Graydon is highly educated, earnest, and prodigiously

talented. He is not a sell-out or a phony. That is so rare now in art it calls for almost immediate deification. Relative to the constant guff about nothing we get these days, Graydon deserves an immediate stopping of the presses, his own after-shave, and a year-long one-man show pre-empting *American Idol*. Police horns all over the nation should go off and the Emergency Broadcast Network should come on and tell people that art is officially no longer dead.

Again, speaking relatively, if Pollock's dribble is worth 140 million, we would have to bankrupt the Pentagon cutting Graydon a check for his next canvas. If Graydon is, say, 100 times better than Pollock, then that is what, 14 billion? Start saving now. All these things with such huge pricetags, the Naumans and Koons and Hirsts, will be worth pennies in a few decades, or will be pitched into the sea as flotsam to feed the fishes; but Graydon's works will survive. How he will fare against Bouguereau or Millais or Waterhouse is yet to be seen, but any fool can see that he is already better than his ancestor Maxfield, already better than Rockwell and Ives and Lack, already better than all the phony Moderns with their assemblages and poses and empty constructs. He has climbed out above that already, and future generations will see him competing only with the Wyeths, and with other realists emerging now—Wang, Collins, etc.

Technically his canvases are a marvel, no less, and if you can't see this you are either an artist yourself—strapped blindly to your own technique (as you should be, really)—or you are a narrow-minded ideologue of one sort or another. That artists are lost in their own little worlds is to be expected; but when critics and art administrators have no breadth or depth of vision, we have major problems. We have major problems. The main problem being that the commentary and administering is being done by people who are not qualified to be doing it.

Now, if these critics and art administrators had something better than Graydon to promote instead, I might be able to read their critiques without fear and trembling, without nausea, without feeling like a stranger in a strange land. If these Leviathans of taste and cunning could finish all their cutting remarks by saying, "and here is a drawing I just did that is so much better than Graydon, so much more the direction art should be going," I might be able to calm my mortal coils, to stop sounding furious. But no. I guess everyone needs reminding that these critics and administrators are sitting on no gems. Their pouches are empty. They have no portfolios of their own, and can point to no portfolios. They have negative words in a net bag, tied with a string, and that is all. If we don't like Graydon, we can go back to sharks in tanks and reglued plastic dolls and vials of warm blood and piles of sand and colored squares. No sense letting Graydon and his fellows lead us back in the direction of sanity, when we can continue to talk about excrement and lotto tickets lovingly and continue to extol empty or slashed canvases and continue to rape ourselves on burning piles of rubbish.

Considering the alternative (and we have been considering it, for about 9 decades now), Graydon should be given ticker-tape parades, the key to the city, and free vending machine access for life. We have been feting fools for nothing, promoting peabodies and slugs into seven figures for near a century, and now someone comes along who can bear promotion without the god's grimacing, and we prefer to

look the other way. Because Graydon, in his 30's, doesn't impress each and all as much Giotto, Titian, and Ingres, we prefer to belittle him and keep looking. Rather than welcome him as the long lost prodigal, the outcast returning, and encourage him to climb back into the Pantheon, and take us with him, we prefer to nitpick him into madness and go back to our nobodies, our Lilliputian dreams and claustrophobic journals.

For example, Graydon had the misfortune at the end of last year to be subjected to an interview at NPR with Karen Michel. She began the interview by telling us that Graydon is gay and handsome. How is that pertinent? It is so distastefully Modern, before we even start talking about art, that it makes my head spin. Might she feel free to begin an interview with me by telling the audience I was straight and ugly? Who knows, she might. If the interview had concerned Graydon's large work on the subject of AIDS, then his sexuality might possibly have been pertinent (although, last I heard, straight people were free to paint about AIDS as well). But Graydon's sexual preference had nothing to do with 911, or with anything that could possibly impact this interview. Therefore, one must assume he was either getting points added or subtracted for no reason. Since the interview was a hit piece, we must assume this information was included to prejudice us against Graydon. It is not clear that it would do so, with NPR's audience, but the thinking of these strange people is not always easy to unravel. Because he is a realist, they had decided to slant the whole piece against him in the baldest way imaginable. Perhaps they just forgot that most people who hate realists offhand don't hate gays offhand: they didn't have all their slurs in order. Or maybe they just thought that only the *New Criterion* was listening [once again, see below].

In a part of the interview that was edited out, Ms. Michel had the audacity to steer the conversation to Robert Ryman, a painter of white canvases (I find this interesting, since I have just [written about Ryman](#)). This is the sort of transparent and malicious rudeness that might have been seen by a interviewer of the Buddha, saying, "you know, Gautama, I always loved Mohammed, would you mind if I asked you some questions about the Koran?" Graydon should have said, "Are we live? Yes? Well, I have a question for *you*. How does someone so gloriously ignorant and contemptuous of a subject get hired to do an interview on it? Have you seen my painting in person? No? Then what, exactly, qualifies you to ask me any questions at all? Does NPR pull these shows out of a hat? Tell me the truth—you were just walking by the water fountain and Amy Goodman gave you a microphone and pushed you through that door, right? Without looking at that paper, tell me my last name."

For the record, Graydon said he thought Ryman's canvases were "empty." Ms. Michel thought them "very full." Something is very full of something here, but it isn't Ryman's canvases.

Perhaps the lowest moment of the interview, even below the question about Ryman, was Ms. Michel's implication that there was something unsubtle about the New Britain museum including a text to help viewers with the references, a sort of annotation of the painting. This from someone who prefers the avant garde, where we have nothing but the annotation, where we have a book-length text supporting something liked a dead frog. At least Graydon's painting had some real references that might bear

discovering; with the avant garde the text has to manufacture everything from less than scratch.

James Panero also complains of the same thing at *New Criterion*, although we must assume that Mr. Panero is not coming from the left like Ms. Michel. He doesn't like blurbs; nor do I. But I don't find the inclusion of a text here to be a strong argument against the painting. In this case some annotation may be helpful. If not, don't read it: it is not on an audiotape you have to pay for. As with my *Shelley Altarpiece*, not all viewers will know what they need to know to get the full effect. The literature is for these people: to answer questions that do actually come up. Annotation is only a nuisance when it is more creative than the work itself, when it must be looked to for any meaning. The New Britain's annotation does not fall to this criticism, since it simply clarifies (for some people) things that are already clearly in the painting (for other people). In a reply to Mr. Panero published at *New Criterion*, Charles Lancaster from the Lyme Academy gets the last word on this topic: he points out that no one complains of annotation to Dante or Joyce. Joyce is both the most-annotated and the most-feted author of the last century. Why can Modern intellectuals stomach flighty and false annotation of avant garde nullities and extended annotation of "interior novels" but not stomach four pages of straightforward information? Again, there is some misdirection going on here, and we are now ready to address it.

The other of two letters published at *New Criterion* in response to Mr. Panero's article accuses Graydon of making some use of a "gay bathhouse" in his painting of the 911 Memorial. I can only imagine that this reader finds something offensive in the two main figures in the Memorial, although they don't look gay to me (Ms. Michel twice calls them "buff" in the NPR interview, although they are not buff, either, by normal standards—would she prefer a couple of fat hairy guys standing in for the twin towers?—maybe Jason Alexander and John Goodman as WTC1 and 2—she might. Ms. Glueck at the NYT called them "preppy", another *non sequitur*. Preppy is a style of clothing, and these guys aren't wearing any. How does one wear a loincloth and a blindfold in a preppy manner? If the critics don't like these boys, they need to be a little bit more specific, and accurate: they need to choose their adjectives so that these adjectives impact Graydon and not their own abilities as writers and thinkers). But what I can't imagine is why *New Criterion* printed this letter. What we have is a homophobic moron writing in to agree with everything Mr. Panero said. Is Mr. Panero proud to find that homophobic morons agree with him about everything? Maybe he is.

This is obviously fallout from the AIDS Memorial Graydon did several years ago. All the homophobes and pseudo-Christians are still in a huff about that, seemingly, with *New Criterion* using this as an opportunity to slip in a couple of late, well concealed jabs. But Mr. Panero's wimpy little voice on the radio, as well as his wimpy attacks in print, don't really provide the necessary cover for his true opinions. He fails to convince us (or me, at least) that his stated reasons are his real reasons. His argument just doesn't add up, and you are left reading between the lines, trying to get the real story.

Take, for another example, Mr. Panero's comments on New Realism as a whole. He quotes Mr. Cooper at the Newington Cropsy saying,

The return to realism suggests a return to the "unseen truths" of William James—transcendence, truth, God, spirituality, beauty, natural law, justice, virtue, order, harmony—which modernism has stripped away.

And then responds: "Really? Modernism stripped all of that away?" Mr. Panero's glib dismissal of Mr. Cooper's point betrays a refusal to actually look at Graydon's work, or to take anything that surrounds it seriously. Why, we are not sure. But, though Mr. Cooper's comment may be couched in imprecise or exclamatory language, its gist is clear, and its gist is true. Yes, Modernism has stripped away all that. It may have nothing much to do with William James or unseen truths, but Modernism did not just accidentally deconstruct every pre-20th century category. The old order has been purposely stripped away, in all its forms: some will miss some forms and some others, but all of them are obsolete or obsolescent.

Here is another clipped argument from Mr. Panero that doesn't make much sense: "It [the 911 Memorial] is a machine for illustrating technical skill, far more than it is a moving memorial to September 11." It is interesting to remember that Clement Greenberg said the same thing about the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel: he claimed it was more a technical achievement than an artistic achievement. This claim, like all of Greenberg's manufactured claims, is so absurd and so clearly false that you must ask what his motive was for asserting it. He couldn't say what he meant, which was that he wanted to destroy Michelangelo so that others could take his place (the dream of Dada). So he just concocted a series of airy assertions that might stand, at short notice, as an argument—being careful to choose assertions that Modern people already wanted to believe. Mr. Panero, though not as historically ambitious as Greenberg (I hope, for his own sake), is practicing some similar misdirection: he intends to promote someone other than Graydon, for reasons mostly unknown to us, so he must cut Graydon down with any set of sentences he can think up at short notice. Although he has no reason to think that Graydon is just showing off here, and gives us no reason or proof of that assertion, he states it anyway. At a time when almost everyone is jealous of technical skill, at a time when *ressentiment* is at its peak, this is another cliché that is sure to catch the majority, another slur that is certain to remain unanalyzed by all.

*Mutatis mutandis*, the same can be said of James Cooper, as I hinted above. With any cursory perusal of the Newington Cropsy website, one must discover that they are a Christian organization. Of course, this can either be good or bad. But when their spokesman leads with the argument that Graydon is not Raphael, we are led pretty quickly to the possibility that we are being misdirected for some reason. As I just showed with Greenberg, when people say things that don't make any sense, or that are gloriously beside the point, it is usually either because they are absolute fools or because they don't want to tell you what they are really up to. We will give Mr. Cooper the benefit of the doubt here and assume he is just dodging. He can't really expect that Graydon *would* be Raphael, and he can't really expect us to believe that he is not going to look up from his duties at the Foundation until a new Raphael arrives and drops a load of paintings directly into his lap. So he must mean something else. As with Mr. Panero, the fact that he allowed his quote to be used in what everyone must have known was going to be a hit piece

means that he probably would like to see Graydon stumble. I can't prove any of this, of course, but both Nietzsche and Sherlock Holmes would back me up here, I think. The psychological and physical evidence all points in the same direction.

Now, many may be surprised to see me taking this side here, since I was notorious in Austin in the 1990's for my attacks on the "Day Without Art." On this website I have a couple of letters to the editor that ridicule that whole concept. But I have never had the least problem with Graydon's AIDS Memorial, as a piece of politics. In fact, in my old letters, I say explicitly that this sort of work would be the proper artistic response to the tragedy, rather than an infantile draping of art with plastic baggies, and a necessary link between art and homosexuality. I am never personally very interested in political art, no matter what the subject, but I am neither surprised nor offended that Graydon painted his painting, or that he did it the way he did it. All that is his artistic call, of course, and, judged by the standards such a work must be judged by, it is a near perfect success. I might have done a couple of things differently, but, again, so what? Graydon paints his paintings and I paint mine, and we have no plans to change that.

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The greatest tragedy in all this may not be 911, and it certainly is not Graydon's painting (in the sense that Mr. Panero called it a tragedy); the greatest long-term tragedy on display here is the bottoming out of art criticism. If I thought that this bottoming out was the final step toward extinction, I could embrace it fully; but it is nothing like that. I think it is clear that this bottoming out signals the final vulgarization of analysis: not its end, but its arrival at a permanent nadir—a culture-wide, equal-access morass.

Just think how bored people must be to listen to talk shows like NPR or to read journals like *New Criterion*—and to admit it (and these places, like the *New Yorker*, are supposed to be for intellectuals). People's standards have dropped so much in the past score of years that they will listen to conversation which, until recently, would have been considered gibberish. I have seen and heard a few other sensible people being interviewed on TV or radio, and they seem like fish on the wrong side of a fishbowl, gasping for air, trying desperately to find some meaningful word or idea on which to hook a fin, and finding nothing. The level of discourse is sub-collegiate, no, sub-secondary school. I have heard more rational repartee from the Little Rascals.

The NPR interview was five minutes of nothing. Ms. Michel never even spoke to Graydon, in the part that made it to the airwaves. Graydon is heard twice, once reading two lines from the Slow Art manifesto, and then again saying something off-the-cuff about the Titanic. It is clear as sunshine that NPR edited him down to his least appealing 15 seconds, and then surrounded that with negative chatter. Who on God's Green Earth wants to hear that, except a bunch of losers practicing for the Brave New World? Who on either side of any argument could benefit from that?

Mr. Panero's critique of Graydon was nearly as empty, and equally transparent. Just look at the length. Who can say anything given only two pages? Or look at his interview with Jacob Collins. He asks him nothing: what did you have for breakfast, what size shoes are those, what time is it? The whole world is moving toward the blog or the soundbite. Everything must be short and breezy and informal, digestable over a PowerBar in the car or a quick espresso while wireless at Starbucks. Beyond this, the people involved have become smaller and smaller. Soon they won't even speak to each other, they will just squeak and eat cheese.

About Ms. Michel or Mr. Panero, one can't help but think—as J.M. Barrie said of Smee—"I know not why he was so infinitely pathetic, unless it were because he was so pathetically unaware of it." These are the kind of people who now gravitate to the arts and media, and no one ever makes them accountable for anything. For some reason, people keep tuning in. One is reminded of the Gary Larson cartoon called "After Television" where the family is sitting in the living room watching a blank wall. We already have Ryman's white canvases; what kind of stretch is it to have a white screen? The screen is as good as white already. One could erase Graydon's interview with one wipe of a small rag, one quick pass with an artgum. All conversation and commentary has become negative space, a static drone.

This is precisely why Andrew Wyeth never did any of these interviews, why J.D. Salinger bowed out of the world 40 years ago. But Wyeth was able to get on without them; PR was an entirely different beast then—just 50 years ago—a beast of much smaller proportions, with far fewer teeth and much less of the smell of wet fur. Like the Buddha, Wyeth had the fortune to predate the age of the interview, the age of the all-engulfing, all-deciding media. Even with a famous name, it appears Graydon thinks he cannot get where he needs and deserves to be without the proper promotion. He is competing with empty husks who are promoted by the deepest and most unscrupulous pockets ever known to history. Even though his pod be full to bursting, he cannot be expected to make any headway against this current—at least in his lifetime—without some major rowing from his crew.

One would think they could portage this boat into a smaller, clearer running stream—the kind of little backwater Wyeth spent his life in—but that thought appears to have devolved into another species of naivete. Like all air above us, all water is interconnected, and even the smallest rill is now polluted. You can climb the tallest mountain and begin your journey from the spring itself, from the very snow's edge, it will not matter: as soon as the prow touches water, some Modern moron will poke his head out of the spring to bite your oar and shred your sail, some deconstructing dipshit will crawl from the snow and begin coughing her noxious phlegm into your ear. That will be the signal for a host of chorusing crickets to arise from the rocks, chirping pamphlets at you and singing your superego into utter submission under the rub of some pseudo-religion or pseudo-politics.



Hughes and Kramer and Panero and all the rest of the confused critics, from top to bottom, don't seem to have any idea what the river or road out of Bedlam looks like, so I will tell them. It looks like Graydon Parrish. He is not all the road, neither the whole width nor the whole length of it, and assuredly not the end of it: but he is on the road, making his honest way. How far along that road he will go, and how large a track he will make, is yet to be seen, but all on that road deserve a merry wave and a free AAA card. For, unlike those on the Modern road—which is unpaved, piled high with plastic litter (and which turns out to be a closed oval with turns banked the wrong way)—the road Graydon is on is paved, straight, and with plenty of room for widening. It will not take all traffic, but the pavement is pleasing to the best tires: here one can accelerate with no loss of tread, with just touch of the throttle.

The self-appointed experts on both sides of the road can argue about specific points in Graydon's work, and in other new realism, but the bottom line is that if Graydon cannot be encouraged and held up as an example to younger artists (instead of the empty heroes of the avant garde), we cannot expect any improvement in the arts in the near future. We should not be comparing Graydon to Raphael, we should be comparing him—as a prototype of the artist now—to Bruce Nauman and Damien Hirst and Robert Rauschenberg and Odd Nerdrum and Lucian Freud and Jenny Saville and John Currin and Claudio Bravo. I don't know either Graydon or his work that well: he may be flawed in any number of ways. But the rest of these people are fakes and phonies of the most extravagant sort, people whose ambitions and motives are always suspect and often disgusting. If we waste Graydon, as we have wasted so many lesser talents, we will have no one to blame but ourselves. We will deserve the ever-widening desert we have created, the bugs and bones and brittle bark (and paper bags) we must survive upon, the wind-blasted cave we will huddle in, continuing our deconstructing to the bitter end by pulverizing the very stones we sleep upon.\*\*

That was for the critics, but for Graydon I have this to say: you don't need these people anyway! Avoid them like the plagues they are. They are rotten bridges to nowhere. You need a few good clients and your freedom—the rest is nothing but a drain upon you. Word-of-mouth can still outtalk this propaganda from either side, the hit pieces and constant drone of misdirection. A few true words from a real person can trump an entire publishing empire. These institutions overrate themselves. It does not matter if 100,000 are listening to the white noise of NPR or the *New Yorker* or CNN or ARTnews, or if a million are—white noise is white noise and it does not adhere to the brain or the spirit. Numbers mean nothing, as Thoreau taught us. It is more important to do something real, that one person sees, than to do something fake, that 100 million see. The fake thing will be erased by the wind very soon, but the real thing will take root and persist. That is the way the world works. Fake things have to be reinvented and re-released every other morning, to keep the population up; but real things are rare, they don't beget and multiply, they don't advertise, they don't hang out on the street corner. If they are worthy of life, they keep waking up: the Muse pinches them each morning for the general good.

The way you can tell a real thing is that when it is ignored, it is the ones who ignore it who suffer, not

the thing that is ignored. If the Modern critics ignore real art, then it is they who have to live without it, they who suffer. We, as the artists, still get to create it and to live with it, whether it sells or not. We suffer only insofar as the gift of the Muse fails to satisfy us: and as far as we are true artists, how could it? We have sought true art and we have found it—as artists we are blessed to the limit of blessing.

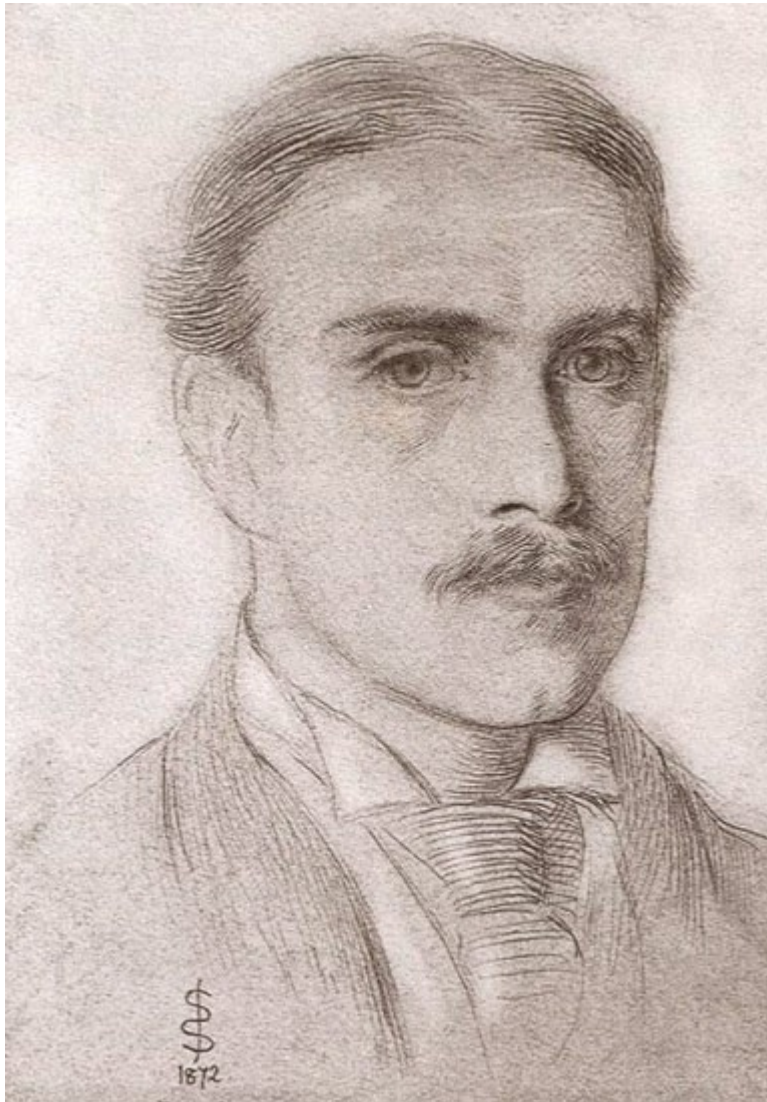
\*To be perfectly clear, the 911 Memorial never made me want to laugh. That was not the point of my *Guernica* comparison.

\*\*And by “we”, I mean you, you mudbrained Moderns, you children of the 20th century. Personally, I was hatched from an ancient egg, and am blameless.

Addendum: James Cooper of the Newington Cropsy finally got around to reading this in September of 2008 and writing me a response. He said I was wrong about Graydon, who was nothing next to Jacob Collins. Then he said my work was also nothing as far as he could see (although I don't think he has ever seen it, except on this site: that's a careful critic for you, dismissing an entire body of work based on a 30-second pass through a website). He then asked me what my criteria of art were. This proves he hasn't looked at this website for more than a few minutes—enough to see his own name—since I have about 50 articles listing my criteria about every last thing in the universe. I am known as the most opinionated person in art, but he can't find my criteria. I told him, "My one and only criterion of art is that the less talented should remain silent in the presence of the more talented: so shut the fuck up!" That seemed to do the trick. I haven't heard from him since, which is just the way I want it. I welcome the input of all qualified people, but I don't include critics in that list. Like Whistler, I consider them to be presumptuous interlopers who don't even deserve a serious response. In fact, they deserve to be shunned and ridiculed. I do my best in that regard.

# Walter Pater - against the 20th century

*by Miles Mathis*



*by Simeon Solomon*

In recent articles I have attacked the contemporary art critic as a shell and a sham, a rattling husk, an empty pod, a person who, in a time or culture of sense, would be allowed only provisional use of a pen—the provision being that he or she used it only for a shopping list or, preferably, a will.

In this article I go in search of the last art critic (who was not also an artist) who had any sense of what art is about, and I find that I must go back some 140 years to find him. This critic was Walter Pater. Now, I am far from idolizing Pater as a stylist, as many have. I much prefer the prose of Ruskin or Carlyle. Pater, though often charming and subtle, is too plodding and indirect and humorless for my taste. And for someone famed for his felicity, Pater too often rings a dull bell, like his modern

counterparts. For instance, in "The School of Giorgione," the essay from which I will be quoting here, Pater closes by using—twice—what he calls a "serviceable expression" from the French: "vraie verite." That means, literally, "the true truth", and it is not really any more serviceable in serious English writing than it is in serious French. It is redundant, and was not less redundant in 1877. It reminds me of John Dean's Watergate testimony, where he related again and again what he called "the true facts." As opposed to the false facts, I suppose. It also reminds me of some of the clunkers of Arthur Danto, except that Pater limits himself to one major clunker in this essay, whereas Danto tries to limit himself to one major clunker per sentence, and often fails at that.

But unlike contemporary critics, Pater's bad notes are ultimately forgivable, since his heart is almost always in the right place. He is the sort of kind and gentle soul, highly educated and yet somehow still lucid, whom you could see actually inviting to your opening. He might bore everyone near to tears with nine out of ten of his wandering comments, but the nine would never be offensive, and the tenth would be brilliantly penetrating.

I choose "The School of Giorgione" to quote from since, although I disagree with the main thesis, it supplies a greater percentage of penetrating comments than one can find anywhere else, either in the essays of Pater or elsewhere in art criticism by non-artists. After dealing with [Saltz](#) and [Schjeldahl](#), I wanted an essay I could use as a positive example. So I will quickly finish off my negative comments and use the rest of Pater's essay as a shining testament to what art criticism can and should be (and sometimes was, long long ago).

The negative comment is regarding Pater's insistence that "*all art aspires toward the condition of music*." Pater italicizes that sentence himself, since this is the central thesis of the essay. This belief was popular in the second half of the 19th century (think of Whistler's nocturnes and symphonies) and it contains a grain of truth. The perfect marriage of form and content in music does make music very pure, from a theoretical standpoint. In music, the form is the content, and it is impossible to separate the emotion from the notes. Critically, this has been seen as an artistic ideal, but it is not. It is only a musical ideal. Or, more precisely, a musical truism. That is the way music is, for better or for worse. But other arts, although they may aspire to a more perfect marriage of form and content, do not aspire toward the condition of music. Only music aspires toward the condition of music. Painting can only aspire toward the condition of painting and poetry can only aspire to the condition of poetry.

Pater has gone too far. His claims and definitions make music the highest art, which it is not. There is no highest art. That is like claiming that there is a highest fruit, or a highest type of woman. Just as we are grateful for mangoes as well as pears, blondes and well as redheads, grapes as well as olives, gamines as well as bombshells, red deliciousses as well as Granny Smiths, brainies as well as ingénues, we must be grateful for paintings as well as sonatas, sculptures as well as concertos. A ranking of the high arts, like a ranking of bust sizes, is an impertinence, or worse. It is not only a slight to the Muses, it is a mischief to young artists, since they immediately begin to chase phantoms. Every popular theory like this leads to years, sometimes decades, of wasted thought and effort, most of it to impress some

careless critic who was just looking for something to say.

Painting cannot aspire to music or the condition of music. Painting can only aspire to its own perfection. This is made even clearer by realizing that, by Pater's own argument, the relationship of form and content in music is an analogue to photography, not painting. In photography, the form and the content are the same thing, as in music. There can be no separation. In photography, form and content are laminated together. A photograph cannot be "wrong". Except for dodging and burning, and other small developing pushes, a photograph is a formal whole, incapable of being expressively deconstructed. If the form is boring, it is because the subject is boring, and vice versa. You cannot delaminate one from the other.

I am not saying the analogy is perfect, but the same is true with music. If the music is boring or bad, it is because the note progression is boring or bad. The note progression is both the form and the content. As with dodging and burning in photography, you can add rubato or speed and loudness changes, but this can only do so much. These things can perfect good photography and music, but they cannot make a bad photo good or bad music good.

Painting is not like music or photography. The form and content must be married, but they cannot and should not be laminated together. Music is not an ideal for painting for the same reason photography is not an ideal for painting. The space between the form/content lamination is precisely the place where expression enters painting, and this is not true of music or photography. In music and photography expression arrives through different doors. In photography it enters almost entirely through choice of subject, composition, and lighting (and much less through developing, toning, etc.). In music it enters through note choice and note progression, speed, and loudness. But in music there is no gap between the form and the content, in which to insert expression. If you want to change the expression, you have to change the notes themselves, and this is because the notes are both the form and the content.

In painting, the form and the content can be separated, as we have ample proof in the 20th century. You can have form with no content and content with almost no form. Even in a painting where the form and content are married in an old-fashioned way, different parts of the same painting can have varying levels of lamination. In what we would call bad paintings, large parts of the painting may be delaminated, with the form failing to support the intended content. One part of the painting may express one mood, where another part (accidentally or mistakenly, we assume) expresses another mood. The artist has lost control of the marriage, and his forms and contents are slapped together willy-nilly.

But the ideal for painting—the condition that painting aspires to—is not an absolute lamination of form and content, as in music or photography. An absolute lamination of this sort would squeeze all the expression out of the gap, and make the painting worse, not better. The condition that painting aspires to is a fully artistic treatment of this gap, a masterful insertion of expression into this gap, so that all forms support all contents, and all parts of the painting support all other parts of the painting. As in a

real marriage, the perfect combination is not a lamination; it is not an air-tight seal at all points. No, it is a balancing along the gap, a placement of expression and passion in the right amounts at the right time, based on wisdom and restraint as well as desire and excitability, so that beauty is the result. "Perfect" in either case means perfectly balanced, not absolutely joined. A perfect marriage is a perfect separation at all points, with expression in the gap; not a perfect adhesion, so that not even a fingernail can be inserted between form and content, man and woman.

It would be fascist to claim that painting must deal with certain contents or certain forms: no, we must allow the artist to decide this. But it is not fascist to claim that in a successful painting the forms must support the contents. There must be both forms and contents, and the forms cannot usurp the contents. This is a matter of logic, not politics or theory. Forms without contents are empty and inartistic. Therefore they cannot be part of art. Contents without forms are impossible; we need not speak of them. Forms that usurp the contents are interesting only to the psychotic, and should be limited to the asylum. All forms that support contents may be artistic, and such output must then be judged based on the actual talents and passions involved.

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Now let us return to Pater. What is interesting about his essay, from a positive point of view, is that Pater uses many very penetrating and correct observations to support a false central thesis. He collects a large number of true and useful sub-theses, supplying us with many colorful quotes, and all we have to do is jettison the main thesis. We ride along with him on his subtle and lovely little train, hopping off just before the final destination.

What is even more interesting is that if we take all of Pater's sub-theses and quotes in this essay, and add them together, we get the perfect argument against the main argument of the 20th century. In this one little essay, Pater destroys the entire 20th century before it arrives.

In the sentence right after the italicized sentence I quoted above, Pater says this,

For while in all other kinds of art it is possible to distinguish the matter from the form, and the understanding can always make this distinction, yet it is the constant effort of art to obliterate it.

Pater means this to confirm the primacy of music, and it fails to do that, but otherwise the sentence is true. Art always did try to minimize the line between form and content, since forms that stood out too prominently could only divert attention away from the "art". The invisibility of the forms was the art, in the sense of art as successful technique. As Whistler put it in *The Gentle Art*, a painting that looked difficult was a failure. A painting should look effortless. Even more than that, the question should never come up, except for other painters. If the audience is looking at forms, they are looking at the wrong thing, that is all. They might as well be looking at the frame, or the carpeting, or out the window. To say that a viewer should be looking at forms is to say that in a successful Hollywood blockbuster, the

audience should be looking at their watches.

You can already see how this undercuts the main argument of the 20th century. Prominent critics like Fry and Bell and Greenberg (and almost everyone else) led with the argument that the conventions of art should move to the fore. Conventions highlighted were a sign of purity, conventions standing alone were signs of high intellect, forms stripped of all meaning and intent were political signposts or arrows pointing at a more "honest" future. Up to the current moment, we have Schjeldahl telling us that Ryman's white canvases—which are just bald forms—are a way of "saving art." We are not told what Ryman is saving us from or saving us for. We cannot be told without enlarging the lie to a size where it takes a recognizable form, since the entire thesis can only thrive in the shadows, as some lurking grey entity, like a starved mouse with spectacles and a typewriter. This applies not only to the "saving art" claim but to the entire thesis of forms as something that should be brought into the open. This thesis has maintained its hold over criticism for a century only by never once being looked at critically. The thesis exists today in the same partial, undigested, ridiculous state it was born in, and it has never matured into an idea that the mainstream reader could even pin down. No one, not even the critic himself, looks at the idea closely as it scurries by. It is just another modern idea, like plastic baggies or cell phones, that is accepted without thought.

But if you look at the idea with a clear head for even a moment, it is obvious that it is just a piece of vulgarity, or a piece of pathology. It is the argument that we should prefer a thing that is broken to a thing that is not. It is equivalent to arguing that it is more intelligent or honest to nail a DVD to the wall and admire its roundness for two hours than to put it into the player and watch the movie thereon. It is equivalent to arguing that, to achieve full sexual realization, one should avoid both women and online porn, instead crawling into the box your computer came in, and admiring the texture of the cardboard.

Of course Pater would never be caught implying such wickedness. He had the good fortune to predate the psychotic century, and could answer all foolishness in quiet tones, sure of some audience at least. I am not so lucky.

Here is Pater's next quote for us to consider:

...lyrical poetry, precisely because in it we are least able to detach the matter from the form, without a deduction of something from that matter itself, is, at least artistically, the highest and most complete form of poetry.

As in his argument as a whole, so in some of his specific arguments is he correct in his supporting statements and incorrect in his thesis. Here we cannot agree that lyrical poetry is higher or more complete, since any great poem of any sort is complete in itself, with nothing higher except a better poem. But Pater's supporting point is as true as before, since it is basically the same: matter and form should not be detached, they should be attached as perfectly as may be. Any detachment implies a deduction from the "matter itself", which is to say the art itself. The forms and conventions must be

attached to the subject, since they support it. You can no more detach the forms and place them in the fore than you can detach the foundation of a house and put it in the front yard, expecting the house to remain standing.

To say it again, without any misapplications:

The ideal examples of poetry and painting being those in which the constituent elements of the composition are so welded together, that the material or subject no longer strikes the intellect only; nor the form, the eye or the ear only; but form and matter, in their union or identity, present one single effect....

Perfectly stated. Now, just before this quote, Pater says this:

Art, then, is thus always striving to be independent of the mere intelligence, to become a matter of pure perception.

Pater then tells it that it does this by welding form and matter together perfectly. But look again at this last quote. This is precisely the idea that the next generation of art critics would turn on its head. In another place, that quote could lead an argument of Fry, or of Greenberg. Of course, Fry or Greenberg would mean something quite different by "intelligence" and "perception." Greenberg would tell us that art striving to be independent of intelligence should jettison all of what Pater is calling matter here, and what I am calling content. To become a matter of "pure perception," Greenberg would recommend taking only one form, shape say, letting that stand alone, very large, underlined and highlighted, and ditching all else. So "pure" would mean "simplified down to one thing." This would make perception very easy, since the viewer would only have one big thing to perceive, and he would be hit over the head with it as soon as he entered the room. And, of course, this would make the viewer "independent of intelligence" since he wouldn't require any.

Much of the difference between the 19th and 20th century can be seen in one word in that last quote, the word "mere." Neither Fry nor Greenberg nor any other modern critic would have needed that "mere," since in standing the quote on its head they would be deleting all that Pater meant by using that "mere." Pater is implying that intelligence isn't enough in the presence of art, whereas the modern critic is implying that intelligence is too much. Pater is arguing for complexity and fullness, where the modern critic is arguing for simplicity and emptiness. The modern critic is paring away, whereas Pater is content with the entirety.

You see that Pater is arguing that you must have both form and content, where Greenberg argued that all content "must be avoided like the plague" and that most historical forms were not central to painting. Greenberg is a minimalist but Pater is a maximalist. Pater is not only satisfied to keep form and content, he is also concerned to subordinate form to its proper place as a means. Any form in its proper place is an artistic form. And this is because a form may be either artistic or inartistic. It is the



use of the form that makes it artistic, so that misuse must make it inartistic. In fact, any convention or form, once removed from its subordinate place as a means, becomes inartistic. Even color or shape, once separated out and placed in the fore, is inartistic, by definition. “Artistic” implies proper use, and improper use destroys the definition. By this way of looking at it, the modern critic has argued that art should become inartistic. Artistic forms that become ends are no longer artistic forms, just as the foundation of a house, removed into the front yard, is no longer a foundation. A foundation that does not support anything is not a foundation, by definition.

After this, Pater finally arrives at a consideration of the school of Giorgione, as in his title, telling us,

By no school of painters have the necessary limitations of the art of painting been so unerringly though instinctively apprehended, and the essence of what is pictorial in a picture so justly conceived, as by the school of Venice.

Now, I am not so concerned with agreeing or disagreeing with that assertion as I am in pointing out to you the fact that Pater believed that painting had necessary limitations, and that painting had an essence. Whether the Venetians perceived that first or best is not the point; the point is that they perceived it, and that everyone before and after them, up until 1900, perceived it as well, including Pater and the critics of the late 19th century. It was not until the next generation that art critics would begin to believe the opposite.

Current wisdom, of course, is that art has no limitations and no essence. Art is anything that anyone labels art. According to the tenets of pluralism, art has no lower boundary and no outer boundaries (upper boundaries don’t really come up in modern conversation). It is not modern to consider what the various arts are best suited to express; rather, it is modern to try to discover what the arts are most ill-suited to express, and to force them to express it regardless. This is clearly pathological, even to those who are doing it, but it is also modern to embrace pathology as pathology, as another species of “honesty.” As a form of medical experimentation, this may make some small amount of sense, who knows, but as artistic experimentation, it makes no sense. Pretending to be sick or crazy may make you more compassionate toward the truly sick and crazy, but neither the compassion nor the fake pathology will make you a better artist. As a nurse in a psychiatric ward, you may have some new qualifications; as an artist, you can be nothing but a poser, either before or after your fake bout of insanity.

To avoid this insanity, let us return to our very sane guide Pater, who schools us next in this way:

In the art of painting, the attainment of this ideal condition, this perfect interpenetration of the subject with the elements of colour and design, depends, of course, in great measure on dexterous choice of that subject....

Aha, a new claim from Pater, this one as true as the others. I have tried to get this point across myself many times, with little help from critics or other artists. Finally, I have Pater to back me up. Well, he

backs me up even more:

For although its productions are painted poems, they belong to a sort of poetry which tells itself without an articulated story.

Pater is talking about genre painting, and Giorgione's genre especially, but he might as well be talking about my own painting, since I belong to the same genre. In this genre, we believe strongly in the limitations of painting, in the suitability of painting for certain things—namely for a pictorial poetry of form without an articulated story—and in the primacy of subject. Unlike many contemporary realists—who believe that painting is mainly about light falling on just about any subject—we believe that the subject is more important than the light. For us, light, composition, color, and all other forms and conventions, are only artistic means, empty in themselves. They only acquire meaning in the service of a subject. Without a subject to serve, all these forms and technical matters are worthless and inartistic. Just as no amount of dodging or burning can make a boring photograph interesting, and just as no amount of rubato can make a boring progression of notes interesting, no amount of beautiful light, beautiful composition, or beautiful color can make a boring subject interesting. A boring person in great light is still boring. A pig in a luxurious and well-lit sty is still a pig.

Contemporary photography is cut by the same schism. The majority of contemporary photography is done by those who think that enough expensive equipment can buy an artistic image, who think that an 8x10 photograph of anything is artistic as long as the print is pristine, who think that enough computer manipulation can make any image interesting. A tiny minority is more concerned with subject, and they understand that given the proper subject and the proper attitude toward that subject, you can create a masterpiece with a pin hole in a box. They don't care if your negative is scratched or if your toner ran or if your printing was done at WalMart; they only care who was standing in front of your camera, and who behind it.

Pater pushes us even further:

Now it is part of the ideality of the highest sort of dramatic poetry, that it presents us with a kind of profoundly significant and animated instant, a mere gesture, a look, a smile, perhaps—some brief and wholly concrete moment—into which, however, all the motives, all the interests and effects of a long history, have condensed themselves, and which seem to absorb past and future in an intense consciousness of the present. Such ideal instants the school of Giorgione selects, with its admirable tact, from that feverish, tumultuously coloured world of the old citizens of Venice—exquisite pauses in time, in which, arrested thus, we seem to be spectators of all the fullness of existence, and which are like some consummate extract or quintessence of life.

That is the truest and most beautiful pair of sentences in this essay. It doesn't get any better than that in the history of art criticism. Notice the "admirable tact" of the artist, the "ideal instants" which are the

art. I will close here and allow you to withdraw with that lovely image in your head, an image of the art critic who knows how to write as well as how to love art.

# Philip Pearlstein and the plastic nude

*by Miles Mathis*



This month [January, 2009] Philip Pearlstein's small retrospective in Montclair, NJ, is reviewed by Ken Johnson of the *New York Times*. Johnson begins the review like this:

Around 1961, when he was in his late 30s, Mr. Pearlstein began to paint pictures of nude people from life. It was an old-fashioned idea, but in his hands, it became shockingly modern. He stripped the nude of almost all its customary associations. Beauty, eroticism, mythology, allegory: all the traditional justifications for nudity in painting were gone, leaving only the bare fact of the naked human body.

As usual, I seek sense in that paragraph, and also as usual I fail to find it. Johnson's article is not a critique, so none of this is meant as condemnation of Pearlstein. It is meant to be self-explanatory: anyone reading this will know who Pearlstein is, why else would they read it? If they are reading it, they probably like Pearlstein, so there is no reason to say anything substantive. All the readers need is a bit of tweeking from their daily slumbers, a bit of reminding they are still alive and can still read (or what now passes for it) in one modern language. So this introduction is a set of four sub-declarative sentences, posing as a meaningful pastime.

Painting nudes is neither old-fashioned nor modern, although Johnson implies in a quiet, almost sneaking way, that it is. If we are to follow his noodly nudge, we must accept without thinking that the

old-fashioned way to paint nudes was via beauty, eroticism, myth, and/or allegory. The modern way is to ignore them all. If a painter ignores them all, we are left with only a “bare fact.”

If I were to try to insert some meaning into this sentence, I would say that a good artist gives us an image that is rich in some way. It may contain one or more of Johnson’s categories here or not, but it certainly will contain *something*. This applies to any good artist, of the past or present. An artist of the past who offers us an empty painting is a bad artist, and likewise for an artist of the present. Why would a viewer or reviewer be interested in a empty painting? Why should we care about the emptiness, as emptiness?

Notice that Johnson does not tell us what Pearlstein’s paintings *do* contain, instead of beauty and so on. We are supposed to understand that Pearlstein’s paintings are modern—and therefore automatically interesting to modern viewers—not for what they contain, but for what they lack. Modern art is a bare fact.

But is it? What, really, is a bare fact? What is a realistic subject stripped of all convention and category and intention? Is it a better painting? Is it a more interesting painting? With Pearlstein, we have a clear answer, though Johnson will not tell it to us. The answer is no, it is not a better painting. It is an empty painting, which is a worse painting.

This would be the natural way to steer any review of Pearlstein, but Johnson must paddle the other direction. He must seem to be writing a review while almost silently continuing a long and subtle lie. We must get to the end of these faux-sentences without once realizing we are traveling head-downwards. More than that, we must get to the end of them firm in our old (but still avant) belief that nothing is something.

We must believe the paradox: that stripping all meaning from something makes it *more* meaningful. “It is crushingly, grindingly empty, but it is modern, therefore its emptiness fills us!”

Johnson continues,

Realism returned from the dead in the 1960s, and Philip Pearlstein was one of its chief revivers.

That sentence appears to give Pearlstein a positive action, but let us unwind it. To revive something, you must fill it with some kind of life, but Johnson just admitted that Pearlstein’s talent and credit was stripping away, down to the bare fact. So he did not revive the corpse, he re-embalmed it.

And why was realism dead in the early 60’s? Johnson doesn’t want us to ask that question, he just wants the past to be dead and the present to be alive. But was it because normal people were sick of old-fashioned nudes, nudes with beauty and eroticism and so on? No. It was because theory and politics had killed all possibility of art for decades. Artists and professional viewers alike had become so anemic, so used to the bloodless wasteland, that they could not stand any signs of life or health. Realism did not return in the 60’s and it still has not returned. Only subject matter returned. Artists were allowed to paint things, but only stripped down bare-fact things. Things used as signposts for other things, things empty and torn and flapping in the cold modern breeze. But never things for their own sake.

Never even bare facts, since facts have content. No, the modern painter is a painter of factoids. The shells and husks of facts, the outlines of ghosts of things that were once facts.

This is Pearlstein's place in the 20<sup>th</sup> century: he was the precursor of John Currin, the soulless modern posing as the revivalist. The only way to make the nude any deader than it was in the 50's was to bring it back, to lay it on the dissecting table and to force people to look at its awful decay. To shove the rotting flesh in the face of the gasping public, as with Lucian Freud, or to prove to the still hopeful and naïve that the body had already gone to bone, as with Currin, or to ruin the last tiny erection by showing the plastic future already here and permanent, as with the brittle mannequins of Pearlstein.

And yet the body in Mr. Pearlstein's pictures — usually young, healthy and female — could not be completely neutralized. Tension between clinical objectivity and psychosexual intrigue gives the pictures a weird undercurrent, as if the painter were wrestling with his desires and almost but not quite overcoming them.

Healthy? Can mannequins be either healthy or unhealthy? Because we see plastic skin instead of Freud's rotting skin, this is health? I don't find any psychosexual intrigue in Pearlstein's nudes, but supposing Pearlstein or Johnson do, the question is begged why either man should be wrestling with these desires. If you desire a mannequin, buy one and have your way. Where is the psychology or the intrigue?

And why "clinical objectivity"? How is there any tension between clinical objectivity and desire? Who is requiring the artist to have clinical objectivity if all he wants is a toss, or who is requiring him to have desires if he doesn't? There is no tension in Pearlstein's paintings, but there is also no tension between objectivity and desire. The sentence and the psychology is just as manufactured and fake as the art.

To say it outright, the tension in a nude normally comes from another place. If there is a tension or a guilt or a negative *frisson* in a nude, it normally comes from the still semi-taboo state of nudity. Either that or it comes from the fact that the male artist is married, and he is not supposed to be too interested in these naked females. He is walking a fine line, and that causes the tension. But that is not what Johnson is talking about here. It is not Pearlstein's wife that is demanding a clinical objectivity, it is criticism and theory that are demanding it. "We will allow the nude back in, but only if you agree to paint it as a modern. To do this, you MUST ditch beauty, eroticism, myth, allegory, and every other positive intention or convention." It is in this way that the tension is manufactured, since it has nothing to do with any feeling or repressed feeling of the artist. It has to do with a *theoretical* requirement, a requirement of theory and politics. Such a requirement has nothing at all to do with psychology or art, it is only a function of the market. Any painter who would agree to these terms is not an artist.

Beyond that, has anyone ever imagined the possibility that Pearlstein was trying to be interesting in some way, but just failed? Has anyone imagined that Pearlstein was trying to be beautiful or erotic and just failed? Has anyone ever thought that maybe, just maybe, Pearlstein is a lousy painter, and nothing more? If you check all the reviews of the past fifty years, no one ever did before me.

Perhaps Pearlstein wasn't trying to deliver the goods to Modernism. Perhaps he wasn't a market whore. Perhaps he was just another mediocre artist, one who happened to be tapped by Modernism to fill the shoes of the moment. Modernism wanted empty realism, and Pearlstein happened to be able to create it. Just as he didn't have the talent to fill a painting with emotion, he didn't have the backbone to stand up and say, "No, I don't want your phony praise. I don't want your dirty money. I don't want to have anything to do with Modernism and all its lies. I don't want to be remembered in the same sentence as Andy Warhol and the rest of those awful people. Just leave me alone!"

Johnson, false to the flag, ends with this,

But if it's a question of contributing something original and influential to 20th-century art, only Mr. Pearlstein's nudes will answer.

Pearlstein's nudes were not original, in that marginally talented artists had been failing to create interesting nudes for centuries. And Pearlstein's particular failure was not original either: the bad photocopy is as old as the photograph. I don't believe for a minute that these paintings were done from life. It is physically impossible to make a painting from life look so much like a painting from a bad photo. The evidence is all there, and any realist painter should know how to read it.

Once again Johnson simply assumes that Pearlstein's influence is a good thing, when the reverse is true. Johnson says it with a smile, when a frown is the only thing that will do. Yes, Pearlstein was influential, in that his success made possible the success of a long line of pseudo-realists, down to Fishl and Currin. Johnson can't state it like that, but the future will.

These painters are not realists. They did not re-vivify realism or the figure or the nude. What they did is use the nude to kill the nude, use realism to kill realism. They are anti-realists. They are Futurists painting figures to further damage the history of figuration. Pearlstein, Freud, Saville, Fishl, Currin, Stuart Pearson Wright, Hockney, Koons, Richter, Hirst, Katz, Close: all were drafted by Modernism to guarantee that the figure and the nude would not become viable again in the major markets. Modernism made them famous instead of real artists. The great danger to Modernism has always been the return of the real artist, painting real things with real emotion. The fake realist deflects that danger more successfully than any other lie of Modernism. The arrival of a genuine realist would topple Modernism overnight, including all the investments of all the rich people. But a fake realist can be stirred in with all the other phony art, guaranteeing its continued survival.

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I mean, look closely at this for a moment:



Someone found that good enough to put into a retrospective. One wonders what didn't make the grade. Look at the little girl's eyes! Pearlstein has managed to get both of them in the wrong place. And who thought it was a good idea to put a ratty old blue sheet on a brown pattern? Same person who bought the little girl's dress, I suppose. This painting is a melange of beginner's errors, of poor light, bad poses, unharmonious colors, awkward composition, stilted brushwork, amateur paint quality, and lifeless skin tones. Pearlstein has somehow managed to combine the worst of both worlds: he has the tired wooden poses of poorly managed live models and the plastic skin of bad photography. Pearlstein may be naturally dull, but it must have taken some real effort and planning to fail on so many fronts at once.

If Pearlstein were a student, I would have some mercy, but under the circumstances I can hardly be brutal enough. This is a rich and famous man whose refuse has been falling on my head since I crawled from the cradle. The reason the nude is *not* being revived, even today, is due to "reviews" like this one of Johnson, that review nothing, but instead continue to extol mediocrities like Pearlstein. We are assaulted with nonsensical non-critiques of aging nobodies that never were anybodies, decade after decade. We are informed of expensive retrospectives of fools and sub-fools, in words written by their foolish varlets, and published by their foolish petty vassals, while everything real is slandered and ignored.

Or witness this:





Ask yourself two questions: why was it painted and why are you looking at it? Is there anything here that is not false through and through? We have a conglomeration of fakes that fail to create fiction. Tempests are attempted but no wind is blowing. If interest was intended, I am uninterested; if offense, I am only offended by the inoffensiveness of it all. This is the transparent effort at poignancy from an unsharpened mind and unskilled hand.

Why am I the only one storming this mud castle? Where are the indignant armies, who will not suffer a false sentence or a bad painter or bought publisher?

Speak out, I beg you. Our time is at hand.

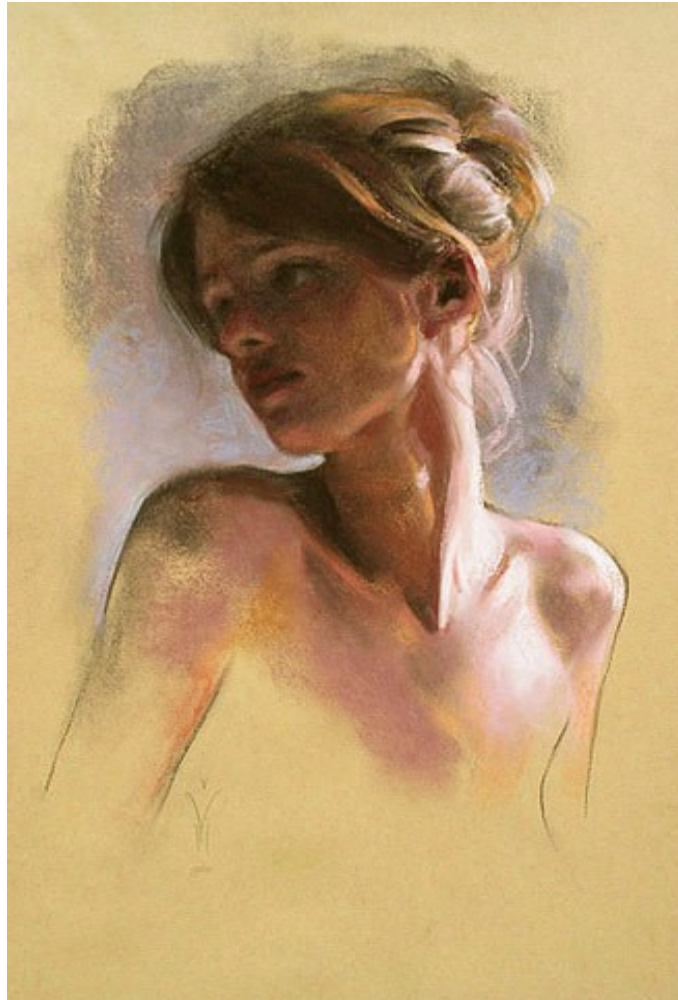


## *The Amber Necklace*



*pencil*  
*20 x 15 in.*

# Calypso's Cave



*a small book  
of illustrated poems*

*by Miles Mathis*



*calypso's cave*

willowwand arm and rushlight nape and  
downdappled upsweep to ripe amaryllis  
like coral reflected through wavywater  
one soaking strand lying seaweed-lazy  
on a throat so fishbelly white it might  
beat with the life of salmon eggs or minnow pulse  
and down again swell to midnight dogrose  
a redhill tumulus perched high on dovercliff  
waxing moonsoft and milky above a plain of vein-blue  
shadow shining like duskleaf and below  
darker still surrounded by seahorse nest  
waking to anemone touch  
a shipwreck island  
to swim and swim



*Iron Taboo*

She buried her hair  
there below boards seven ells deep  
safe with a needle her goldenthread  
iron eye dazzling the dead  
from her head  
asleep

Our bed was straw  
She spun it yellow night by night  
and covered the weft with dead red leaves  
Branches she tied into sapless sheaves  
torches she weaves  
alight

A garden she dug  
wet with sweetbrier, white eglantine  
Propped up a grey groom legged in vine  
priest-king with a penny  
of her makeshift croft  
pumpkinhead  
aloft

Her hair lay long  
like orphrey collar on moss-rose neck  
The limetree hung her broadcloth dress  
her nest of silk whipstitch  
over muddy knees  
apart

She buried the child  
deep between roots where the river winds  
the bones a mother hides no one finds  
and built for a boat a willow bier  
knotted with hair  
her own hands  
asteer

The curragh she sailt  
brownbourn down rindle to sea  
river daughter yet mouthing a digging song  
and threw a spoon to oceanrift

In flaxen bindweed seven ells deep  
I sleep  
adrift





*For Mary*

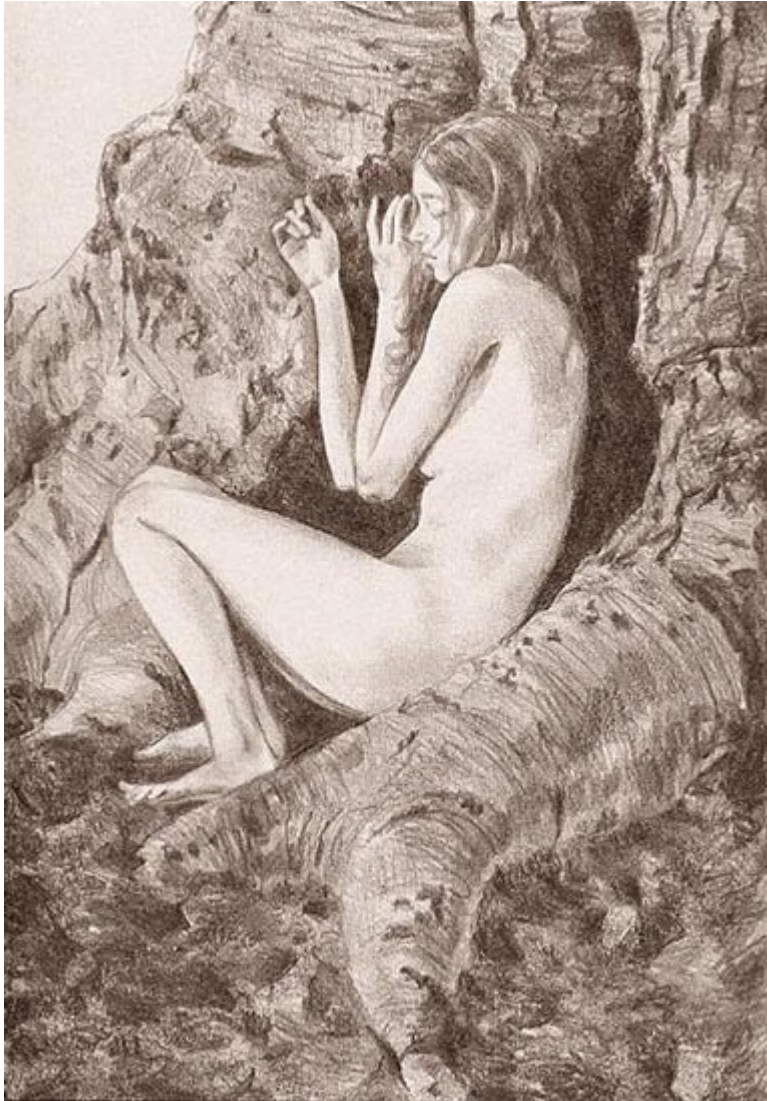
Like death your eyes go deep and grey  
Their marble tastes of breath and sleep  
and patient black and cold-ash clay

Your hands raw willowroots a-sway  
White limbs move lithe and long-a-sweep  
and eyes go deep like death and grey

Winterberry lips do curl away



round mine more murmur and creep  
Go deep like death eyes of grey



*The Cypress Wife*

Melissa brushed the flaxseed from her draped hair  
O mallow mallow and malmsey  
and picked the bluebells from her skirts

and ladyfern and thistle.

She walked a'home through moonlight and coppice  
Sing mallow and yellow malmsey  
Unshoed through ponygrass and willow  
and horsetail and rushes.

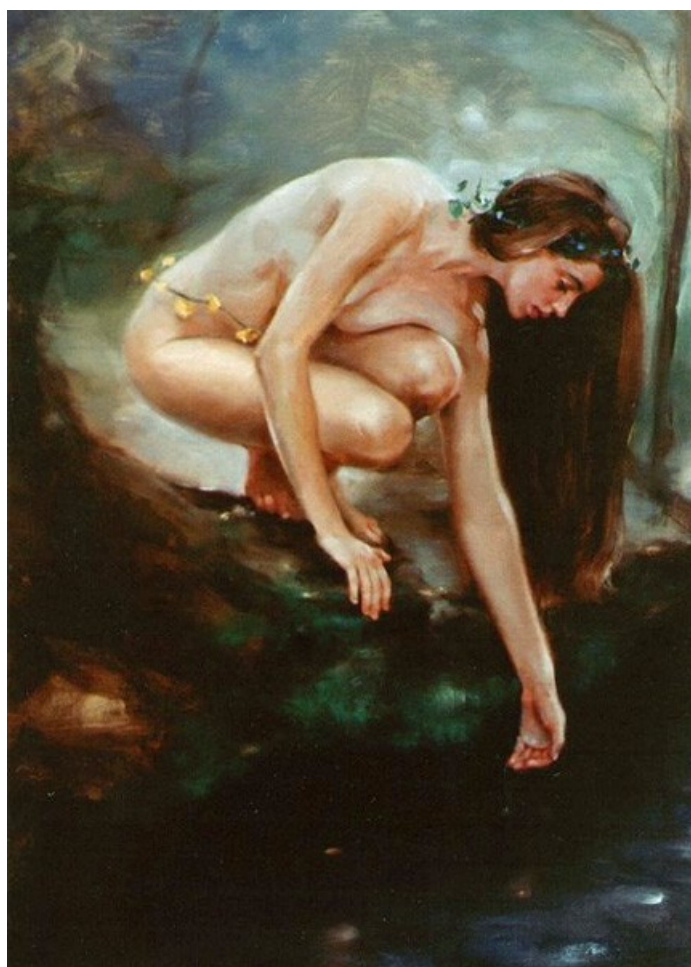
She thought I be seed vessel and him wind fellow  
O mallow mallow and malmsey.

A lacewing brushed Melissa's darksome face  
and greenly paced the air around her.  
Melissa licked the night for passing ghosts  
and whispered mallow mallow.

The moisture messed her netherhair  
and made her silver legs move nicely  
slipping noiseless and mothy and lissome  
O mallow mallow and malmsey.

Great Cypress! called she to a massive tree  
for one more kiss of him I'd marry thee!  
And Cypress listened to poor Melissa  
sing mallow and yellow malmsey

She kissed her fellow by bulrush and weed  
and eelgrass and pussywillow  
And turned to white wife of swaying Cypress  
sighing mallow mallow



*Death is an Otter*

Death is an otter  
swimming rings around the moon  
riverdaughter writing runes around the sun

Life is a fish  
gills wide in flight from webby paws  
scaled son-of-stars, stippled child of middlenight

Death is a bear  
dancing a buzzing whirlpool fur-fearless  
and honeycomb drunk

Life is a bee  
pollen-dusted in sexy flower hop  
unaware of ursa dipping overhead



*painting, you*

a wide ripened the sky-hung lavender  
red spread across the watery air  
i yellow your painted hair, mouthing kiss  
your pink flowering lovely like a budding  
my brush touches greenly the open  
and you close eyeing dark  
black



*Applewood*

The dead may air an applewood of greenrippling bark  
their bed of dark  
below a brown bough shady where it stood  
in a white wood  
shiny with the moon  
blue

Or leaves may dance an orange turn round roots above  
a winding move  
through clay black-grey and dust  
and finger the sleep  
from those down deep  
dead

Some dig dirt and taste sienna-yellow sap  
like mother's lap  
Some spread wide in violet-sacred matricide  
of fallen earth  
this bloody birth  
red

But silver-rimed graves in applewood know children too  
hills not new  
I sleep on overarching grass  
an apple canopy  
is all I see  
you

>>>-<<<





*You*

First, fold your lips into that narrow plummy  
shadow you shake and winnow in your ways.  
Place your eyes deep inside, awake, yes, but as under  
a sunny coverlet, or as under a grey bank  
of moss and black-orange earth, where fishes wait.  
Your hands must go here and there, like they do~  
moths disappearing in dusk.  
And your ears, put them properly beneath the soft brown eaves,  
yes, with gentle thumbtips



*My Last Love*

My last love  
slept on a blue pad  
in a sea of books

I moved them off  
rustling in their jealous stacks  
to make room for me

They waited like shorebirds  
for the wave to pass



## More Poetry – by Miles Mathis

### *You*

First, fold your lips into that narrow plummy  
shadow you shake and winnow in your ways.  
Place your eyes deep inside, awake, yes, but as under  
a sunny coverlet, or as under a grey bank  
of moss and black-orange earth, where fishes wait.  
Your hands must go here and there, like they do—  
moths disappearing in dusk.  
And your ears, put them properly beneath the soft brown eaves,  
yes, with gentle thumbtips

### *Darkling*

The rain comes down  
even through the trees.  
The tide rolls in and out again  
and the trees, fog-lost, rustle in the wind  
and dropping their seeds plant their own friends.

Like manna to my muddy mouth  
I taste the earth exhaling from the sodden ground—  
the ale-drenched breath of Gaea  
or drunken Ceres, queen of cornfields  
and mother of all dew-soaked grasses.

I hear you breathing next to me rhythmically.  
The ceiling I know six feet above, the sky of night much higher.  
A wind blown from some dark corner of my mind or yours

gives an almost imperceptible flutter to the drawn shades,  
bedsheets cut and sewn by my mistress seamstress  
to keep the light in, or out.

Do we sleep in drapes or hang covers as curtains?  
She will not say.

She who comes to me darkling  
slipping between the quilts, penumbral Muse of wakening,  
soft-skinned whisperer of sunless stories.

She who takes my thoughts without asking  
like the tide merging with the impatient beach  
stalls and swallows a mouthful of sand.

She who steals my sacred salt  
but leaves no wave-tossed bottle.

She arrives on the foam—  
rides the black waves as a pearl does, this girl of fishes.  
Her streaming hair slakes my thirst,  
her dripping body cools my skin and sleepy pulse.

Her clam shell and rushes are my nest  
my mind her bower—  
for she has wings as wells as fins  
and brings me birds to share my nest  
birds with speckled eggs and blue.

You do not know these things or care  
asleep in you tangled hair and dreams—  
It would not interest you to know  
of her and her handmade clothes  
fitted round her slender waist  
her buttons reflecting like animal eyes from breast and belly,

her pale-blue cloth and yellow stitching.

~~~~~

I had a dream~

She and I walked through rooms  
with ceilings twelve feet tall  
my paintings on every wall  
paintings of her each and all.

And the old women strange to tell  
spoke to each other of Raphael.  
They huddled together like Fates or Graeae  
passing among them one detached eye.

She led me to another room—  
a room where you were supposed to be.  
But you were not there—  
the walls were bare.

~~~~~

The rain will soak her garden  
tomatoes and snap peas and rosemary bush  
and pumpkins that feed only the pillbugs.

She hallowed that ground, pillbugs and all,  
one midsummer's morning, laying her dress aside,  
sitting like some shiftless scarecrow among her seeds  
singing a make-believe lullaby that made no sense  
nor was meant to.

She blest the pumpkins with her water  
scented her hair and arms with sage and dillweed  
carried away my grave-soil beneath her fingernails.

But you would not like her.  
Your silent exhalations do not give what the trees give  
unexpected with their gifts.  
The moistness on the pillow, unlike the rising sap,  
does no one any good.

I do not know why the cottonwood drops  
his seeds of snow  
or you lie next to me.

She ate an apple in the strangest way—  
holding it in both hands, squirrel-like,  
paying no attention to the core  
only spitting out the seeds  
and handing me the stem, a childish gift.

But you do not know her  
and turn in your cool nakedness only to catch your breath  
caught in your own desire.

You do not see her behind your shut eyes as I do  
you do not see her crawling through the window at night  
leaving her sleeping mother to run to me,  
knocking over my potted plants with her bare feet.  
The fired clay and black earth scattered in bits across the floor  
mean nothing to you.

But she is real and you are a dream, I know,  
and she will sew my shroud as my last word to you escapes  
into the air.

*calypso's cave*

willowwand arm and rushlight nape and  
downdappled upsweep to ripe amaryllis  
like coral reflected through wavywater  
one soaking strand lying seaweed-lazy  
on a throat so fishbelly white it might  
beat with the life of salmon eggs or minnow pulse  
and down again swell to midnight dogrose  
a redhill tumulus perched high on dovercliff  
waxing moonsoft and milky above a plain of vein-blue  
shadow shining like duskleaf and below  
darker still surrounded by seahorse nest  
waking to anemone touch  
a shipwreck island  
to swim and swim

*Treszka*

Treszka, my little fish,  
no matter what is said we had our hour.  
What you become or I, or what we know,  
that hour stands against all the beards and wails of time.  
That stone will remain unpolished by any other mind or eye  
Its edges sharp, no oil of paint or dust of chalk  
will dull it or ground it down.

I have been lost long years now  
in your hair, amongst your little arms and legs,  
in the folds of that first red dress  
in the folds of that first dark-eyed look.  
How sad you were and how sad I,  
lost on different islands of watery grief.  
Simply by sitting and staring

you could blacken all the waves  
with bitter beauty,  
float me out to sea and drown me  
in the curragh of your palms.

What strange land were you quiet queen of,  
what lost city of the silent Sidhe set you up  
to worship for a day.

Will you return to them at the end  
Or will I?

*Sew a shirt*

Weave a garland of eglantine  
to clothe the river maiden in  
and build a bower of clove gillyflower  
to nestle the egg of the wren.

Sew a shirt of silver leaves  
to mantle the wind-bare moon  
or golden leaves to gird the fire  
of the sun's naked noon.

Cut a crease of hart's red leather  
and tool it in truest vein  
to make soft leggings or subtle quiver  
for your brother on the plain.

Make a mickle robe of black  
to warm the bitter stars  
and a blanket of blue to bed the clouds  
from the Sky's discourteous wars.

Inscribe a song on the face of a stone  
that hinders the wandering hull  
and add a line every winter  
til the cliffs be writ in full.

Place a lute in the den of the bear  
til music comes arising.  
Place a pen in the crook of a tree  
and read a green poem in spring.

Form a brune barque of dead ash and rowan  
and lash it with willow twine  
to dress the bones of the fallen elf  
and bind them in proper sign.

Whisper your dreams to the canopied sky  
the roe is silent in thrall  
the owl shall listen in constance  
the loyal mole shall hear you withal.

### *The Art Lesson*

Tess, my mermaid of sea-blue sleeves  
of languid bask, royal-robed,  
blue-powder flower and three-fold leaves  
about your hair: dismiss the hooved  
and horned who trod their summers  
upon hard land. Keep your lovely knees  
to the seaward side of the sand.  
Float your drawings on gentle waves—  
as your line winds your shadow saves—  
while the cloven upon the dry dunes despair.

Dismiss the grey-globed mummers  
fathom-full of airy blast—  
they would your fate forecast in solemn tones  
and box your beauty in a politic thought  
Your apricot ears, comma brows, tarsal bones  
are intellectual dice for such to cast.

Swim out with me, silver child,  
beyond where things are taught.  
There you laugh and dive when I say,  
To draw a pupil, dear, simply make a dot.

### *Vincent and I*

If you arose, all decked in blue, as toothless as the grinning Moon~  
Waxing on the shiny world, haloed green, then grey and black~  
If you of matching waxing halo, trading tones with sky and void,  
Moving arclike through the heavens, swamping every outlined cypress  
Or olive-laden vine with your embracing will,  
Brushing each mistral-waving cornstalk, racing cirrus, redding sod  
With tones of soul-fed air and dusty whitened earth:

If you did rise, could you look hard at such investment  
As trades itself on you: ten million times as worthless as the pumpkinheads  
Of Paris are we, Sotheby and Christie, jack-o'-lanterns missing  
Candles and gavelling up your buried bones. Could you grin,  
As distant as that Merry Moon who has no truck with things reflected—  
Shining just for those who swallow moonbeams whole and do not sell so surely.  
Or does the Sun's corona even feel unfairness—does Tartarus remain  
To yawn at you beyond those crow-encircled fields.  
Does it still matter, etherized among the carpeting stars, dancing in curvy lanes About Pa  
Moon.  
Does pain dance too in tripping time around such Orb.



Do the tendrils touch that wave at us from Sky through measured frame to present Sin.

The Martyr to my cause nails me, though cause is lost, and carries cross,  
Skirting void in spiral steps, through taxied streets, by shadowed shopfronts  
Shallow-signed; and we arrive, God knows where, him all ruddy, blushing  
absinthe and reeking pipe, grinning madly at the Moon rising in my eyes.

*painting, you*

a wide ripened the sky-hung lavender  
red spread across the watery air  
i yellow your painted hair, mouthing kiss  
your pink flowering lovely like a budding  
my brush touches greenly the open  
and you close eyeing dark  
black

*Black Cat*

She was so young.  
I am not old.  
I was a cat once, she said.  
I drove on.  
At the park she showed me her breasts.  
I do not much like cats.  
She always slams the door to my car.  
Otherwise she is very quiet.  
How can you blame me?  
We never made love.  
Of course she thinks she was a black cat.  
Sometimes she wears make-up on her eyes.

She must remove it before I paint her.  
Cats are not that smart.  
Usually I sleep during the day.  
I like to drive at night.  
Often she skips school.  
I did not skip school.  
I had nothing else to do.  
Her family does not own any cats.  
My car is not fancy, but it is fairly new.  
She crawls out her window at night.  
She has nothing else to do.  
There are nine paintings of her in my house right now.  
Eight. I gave her mother one.  
It was not my fault.  
I do not know what I was before I was born.  
If cats are so smart, why do they get run over, I said.  
She is not interested in my paintings.  
Her breasts are quite large.  
Cats know what they are doing, she said.  
I cannot compose my thoughts.  
I must move now.  
The best thing about her is her lips.  
And her neck is very long.  
I am thirty.  
She does not ring the bell, but knocks.  
Cats like me.  
I do not drive that fast.  
My children will be home-schooled.  
The longer her hair gets the more it curls.  
We never kissed.  
My best painting of her is in profile.  
Bright colors do not appeal to me.  
Cats are not as independent as people think.  
I would have pets in the country.  
Once we talked from midnight until four o'clock.

I did not try to swerve.  
She was fourteen.

*Painting the Midi*

Vincent took a sip of absinthe.  
The moon shone blackly through the cypress.  
"Everything has a halo," I said.  
And green is very hard to see.  
"Everything *is* a halo," he said.  
You can go blind painting by candlelight.  
In Holland, Orion is higher.  
Holding a brush with mittens is funny to me.  
He stomped his feet and puffed.  
"The horizon is darker than that," he said.  
You don't need white to paint a star.  
The mind wanders at night.  
I can't feel my ears at all.  
"The fog is getting thicker," I said.  
When I mix my colors, he looks back at the brothel.  
"That's just my pipe," he said.  
I think you dream, whether you close your eyes or not.  
Why does the wind die at night.  
Absinthe makes me choke.  
"Don't worry about green, worry about *blue*," he said.  
A halo doesn't have to be round.  
You would think the candles would flicker more.  
Next time I will paint the candles.  
"A halo must curve, that's all," he said.  
The horizon is a colorful black.  
He should be drinking coffee, not absinthe.  
Tomorrow night we need longer candles.  
He uses all the paint, the bastard.

"The girls, you think they are asleep?" he said.  
In the morning the greys will look different.  
"With cold feet you pay double," I said.  
In America, Indians won't paint in a square.  
Vincent paints the Dog Star like a moon.  
I keep my nose warm with my breath.  
Green still matters, I think.  
"Who will make us oval stretchers," he said.  
I will not go to that brothel with him.  
Vincent is having a coughing jag.  
But I will paint the girls.  
"Europe's a hellhole these days, my boy," he said.  
In the foreground it is green.  
I do not think he wants to be alive now.  
You cannot paint the heavens like a ghost.

### *Amherst*

This town of poetry  
lies two-feet cold  
It cares not one white stone  
who stops among its dead  
to cast about for words  
or touch a birch

A future corpse awalk  
amongst past heaps

### *Van Gogh*

Vincent, eyes above,

beware of foxglove.

*At a Cafe*

*(Somewhere on the Mexican Coast)*

That table there, that weathered wooden chair  
beneath your pen and blue-lined paper,  
beneath your widening, flattening derriere—  
somehow they do not matter do they,  
somehow you really cannot care,  
you there floating disembodied through the air.  
Pen in hand but rarely scribbling,  
unconnected to your soaring brain—  
contemplating death or love,  
looking down from up above  
where weathered chairs  
and grizzled thinning hairs  
look much the same and matter very little~  
for after all, what is in a name?

Your feet are on the floor  
unless you cross your legs,  
knee to knee of course, you know the score—  
no one crosses knee to ankle anymore.  
But what are knees and ankles when you're passing through the clouds  
above the tabloid-reading crowds,  
unaware of rainy smells and muddy shoes  
and whose umbrella goes with whose.  
A sip of coolish coffee and your reverie continues:  
you ignore the waitress, her slender arms, the menus  
and concentrate instead on the world inside your head,  
occupied by only you, and now and then  
quite out of the blue

the occasional revealed truth or two.

The sun is not important  
or the waves or yellow sand.  
These you can dismiss quite out of hand.  
From where you stand sea and shore melt together,  
obscured by the rainy weather, fusing water and land.  
For what is rain above the clouds,  
to one who knows celestial pain—  
the sins of Cain, the guilt of Eve—  
who only asks one day's reprieve, but cannot see,  
oblivious to every tree and stretch of dirt or grass,  
who lets the days go ambling past.

But who can say who knows you well  
that you've created your little hell.  
Only you can tell, who knows the truth  
of Job, of Ruth, of Luke and John and Friedrich Nietzsche.  
You know for you the final worth  
of Mozart's birth versus Darwin's *Beagle*.  
For in the end no god will send  
the eternal everyman's brother  
to reconnect your inner world with that of any other.

But if the answer rolls up on the sand  
inside a bottle, or is scratched by hand on the bark  
of some near tree in a nearby park,  
or is sung upon the waves,  
or is painted in some adjoining caves,  
or is hinted at by the lark,  
or is chirped by crickets,  
you will miss them, far above the prickly thickets,  
pondering, if we may guess, whom to damn and whom to bless.  
Will any of us pass the test?  
Who can tell—we cannot touch you,

you who miss the muddy shoe, the weathered chair,  
the grizzled hair, your own increasing derriere.

*I am not a monk*

I am not a monk  
I am a church  
I am not a church  
I am a steeple  
I am not a steeple  
I am a bell  
I am not a man  
I am a well

I am not the leaf  
I am the root  
I am not the root  
I am the soil  
I am not the soil  
I am the sand  
I am not the sand  
I am the shore  
I am not the shore  
I am the sea  
Deep and dark  
As I can be

I am not a field  
I am the lane  
I am not the lane  
I am the verge  
I am not the verge  
I am the tree

I am not the tree  
I am the sky  
Very wide  
Very high

I'm not the dew  
I am the rain  
I'm not the rain  
I am the water  
I'm not the water  
I am the cloud  
I'm not the cloud  
I am the star  
I look little  
From afar

I'm not a god  
I am flesh  
I am not flesh  
I am breath  
I'm not breath  
I am wind  
I'm not the wind  
I am the message  
I'm not the message  
I am the word  
I am spoken  
I am heard

I'm not a curtain  
I'm a veil  
I'm not a veil  
I'm a glance  
I'm not a glance  
I'm a stare



I'm not a stare  
I am beauty  
I'm not beauty  
I am art  
All of nature  
Not a part

I'm not a frame  
I'm a picture  
I'm not a picture  
I'm a wall  
I'm not a wall  
I am the floor  
I'm not the floor  
I am the ground  
I am earth  
Fat and round

I'm not the cow  
I am the horn  
I'm not the horn  
I am the trumpet  
I'm not the trumpet  
I am the blast  
I'm not the blast  
I am the music  
I'm not the music  
I am the song  
Open mouth  
And sing along

I'm not a house  
I am the loft  
I'm not the loft  
I'm the hay

I'm not the hay  
I'm the needle  
I'm not the needle  
I'm the pen  
Make a note  
To let me in

I'm not the beast  
I am the bird  
I'm not the bird  
I am the wing  
I'm not the wing  
I am the claw  
I'm not the claw  
I am the beak  
So to eat  
So to shriek

I'm not the tortoise  
I'm the shell  
I'm not the shell  
I'm the armor  
I'm not the armor  
I'm the spear  
I'm not the spear  
I'm the sharpness  
I'm not the sharpness  
I'm the point  
With which I stab  
With which anoint

I am not point  
I am line  
I'm not line  
I am circle

I'm not circle  
I am sphere  
Green and fragrant  
Year to year

## LIGHT VERSE

*The Aged Butterfly*  
(for Karen Harvey,  
on a bet, Barton  
Springs, 1995)

O aged, aged butterfly  
How slow the summerwinds you ply  
And land but dazed, one wing awry.  
Shall you rest? Or must you die?

Loveliness fades, we know not why,  
And fading doth but amplify—  
Enchanting the more, like Lorelei,  
Whose fleeing lines we dark descry.

Siren's hair or fair antennae:  
Both perfection do imply—  
Both clarify, both rectify.  
Each Aphrodite's dearest ally.

Yestereve you cast on high  
Green and yellow treetops nigh  
Below the louring greying sky  
The dove and partridge cooing by.

You languish now before my eye:  
Wings aloft, the breeze you try—  
Your beauty still my fears belie—  
Such cannot end! I vainly cry.

Nor dusky moth, nor damselfly  
Nor hummingbird so fleeting-shy  
Nor double dragonfly, like gemini,  
Their delicacy doth signify

Compared to you, my butterfly.  
When you breathe last, when down you lie  
Your soul will rise, I prophesy,  
Ethereal, an angel's sigh.

And we below, earthbound, O Fie!  
Such grace can surely never buy.  
We vie to you our souls to tie  
O aged, aged butterfly.

*[32 rhymes for butterfly]*

*I am the Wandrin' Albatross*

I am the Wandrin' Albatross  
Twelve feet the gap I plow  
Grey harrow a-sowin' the Ocean's seeds  
The lowin' whale my briny cow

I pull the chariot of the Moon  
High tide beneath my feathers  
The Gulfstream and I move on as one  
Together we bestir the weathers

Brother Dolphin leaps my prow  
Sister Sunfish eyes me, baskin'  
She asks, "Who art Thou, and whither?"  
I answer her, "Who's askin'?"

I carry dust from shore to shore  
Pollinator of the World  
By me the fishes fed below  
By me the clamshell pearled

Horizon is not line but Circle  
Hemmin' me in endless water  
Am I son of boundless Earth  
Or Neptune's salty daughter?

I fly on Hyperborean and Antarctic wind  
Witness of Statian black sand and Saba's cliffs  
Of Shetland gusts and Southern Cross  
Of shortest days and greatest Rifts

Like Ahasuerus on the waves  
I measure Infinity tip of wing to tip  
Magellan and Balboa shadowed  
The stern of my silvery ship

Sky five thousand feet above  
Sea floor ten thousand feet down  
I fly nearer Heaven than Earth  
Fall but a foot and I drown

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And when I reach the edge of the World  
Where Sea and Sky collide

I'll ride the tangent of the Sun  
And fish the further side

There, they say, a bird may light  
And study his own reflection  
In water so still and starry-clear  
Unstirred by fluke or fin's convection—

The Deep appears a wingspan near  
Cimmerian pools black as night  
Where Down is the only direction  
Your Life-Spark the only light

And if you dive My Friend breathe once  
Go! do not dream the Sky  
Or you will Wander with me such waves  
as will never tell you Why

*A Modern Life: The Early Years*

There was time eight years ago  
When I had just turned three  
That Poppy bounced me up and down  
Upon his one good knee.

He said, "Son, life is wondrous strange  
And full of things to see.  
But stay away from pretty girls—  
They're trouble, just take it from me."

He said some things that were over my head  
But I understood the gist:  
The one important thing, I took it—

Avoid, at all costs, being kissed.

About that same time Mum took me aside  
For approximately the same reason.  
"Life is mostly nasty and mean," she said,  
"All 'cause of boys, don't you see, son."

She warned me about the men she had known  
And about the man I'd grow into.  
I assured her I'd not as yet winked at a girl  
And certainly didn't intend to.

It's odd, you see, because I knew  
My parents loved each other dearly.  
But when it came to the opposite sex  
They just couldn't see too clearly.

Poppy thought women the weirdest of beings,  
A mystery to all but lord Zeus:  
Easy to anger, hard to predict,  
Non-stoic, humorless, coy, and obtuse.

Mum didn't give as much credit to men  
As she gave to our spaniel Irene.  
Oafish, she thought them, pedantic and rude,  
Loud, dimensionless, crass and obscene.

I grew into a timorous youth  
As you might well conjecture.  
My analyst blamed my lack of pluck  
On Mum's screed and Pop's knee-bouncing lecture.

This may be true, I really don't know.  
It's hard for me to say.  
As I look back on my pitiful childhood

I'm at a loss, to this day.

By five I was already hopelessly skewed,  
My instincts completely repressed.  
I prayed to God to save me from lust  
And feared lest He see me undressed.

I showered with the radio on  
To keep my small mind occupied.  
If I dared to look down, I felt for sure  
The Fates would be looking, pop-eyed.

In kindergarten the girls pinched my bum  
And tied to my desk both shoelaces.  
They puckered their lips and wiggled their ears  
And made terribly sexy faces.

They knew I was tongue-tied and heartbroke and dizzy,  
Hampered by all kinds of scruples.  
I scanned the blue skies for escape from my torment  
But just couldn't find any loopholes.

They knew this, the Sirens, and lured me the more,  
Safe as they were from my come-on.  
But I had no wax to put in my ears  
Or mast to tie myself up on.

So I sailed my wreck from one storm to another,  
Past curly-haired Scylla in Math,  
To green-eyed Charybdis in Music and Art,  
Where my ego was taking a bath.

Psychoanalysis helped me a bit  
By prioritizing my miseries.  
The doctor and I charted each growing complex



And graphed competing neuroses.

After only four years, three times a week,  
Group sessions (all boys) thrice a month,  
I was able to say, straining only a tad,  
"Wicked thoughts about sexth, I haff nonth."

But my time on the couch no doubt did me good  
Though my cure took a beastly long while.  
Unnumbered hours for that Oedipal thing—  
Strictly a case of denial:

My feelings for Poppy, seeming so pure,  
I saw were mixed at the best—  
Doc taught me to see in my muddled up dreams  
Things I scarcely would ever have guessed.

I couldn't go fishing with Pop anymore  
Without seeing him overboard~drowned!  
We couldn't play golf, but I saw him face-down  
In the sand, by my five-iron crowned!

And Mummy, Oh Dear, I can't bear to relate  
The unspeakable things in my brain.  
All this for the woman who nursed me on milk  
And weaned me on Pop-tarts and Tang.

In third grade I finally sobered up some,  
Or my dreams became pretty much dormant.  
I could sit near a girl with long flaxen tresses  
With only a flicker of torment.

Therapy taught me to channel my needs  
Into dozens of useful directions:  
I memorized pi to sixty-two digits

And learned all the Latin declensions.

I mastered the mouth-harp and miniature golf,  
Knew the depths of the seven seas;  
I could hum in perfect pitch the theme  
From Star Trek in four different keys.

I recited one year, in Christmas assembly,  
Mum and Pop in attendance,  
Not only the Constitution's preamble  
and the Declaration of Independence,

But the height and weight of each delegate there,  
The state from which he hailed,  
The bills he introduced in Congress,  
And a summary of those that failed.

I wasn't booed, exactly—  
I had a talent, 'twas plain—  
But popularity isn't conferred  
By removal from stage with a cane.

My mind was moving ahead, forthwith,  
Leaving my body behind.  
My brain, a muscular organ no doubt;  
My biceps hard to find.

A push-up, a sit-up, I couldn't begin;  
Cartwheels, out of the question.  
I lived on popcorn, candy and Cokes—  
Potatoes and meat gave me indigestion.

My allergies kept me out of most sports,  
My asthma from other exertion.  
I weighed no more than a hairless cat,

As pale as a Liverpool urchin.

By ten my condition was chronic:  
I hadn't a clue about life.  
Buried under a pile of books—  
My memory sharp as a knife—

My passions were awfully, painfully dull,  
Blunted by all of my "learnin'."  
I had no time for girls, those sly creatures—  
All that oohin' and aahin' and yearnin'.

Besides, the girls no longer flirted—  
Me so ashen and skinny,  
Tripping over my tied-up tongue  
In a voice both high and tinny.

And just this year they got so tall,  
Girls who last year played with toys.  
Wee Tess, who used to trade me Leggos—  
Now dating high-school boys.

It isn't fair, but fairness is moot—  
Or so I am told by my parenties.  
In love, as in war and shopping by phone,  
There simply ain't no guarantees.

But things, I think, will be simplified greatly  
In a year or two, I'm sure.  
Let Nature take over, she'll solve all my problems:  
Puberty is the cure.

*Star-nosed*

You look just like a star-nosed mole to me  
the way your soul sits on your face so rippingly.  
I cannot see past such a grand protuberance  
excelling elephant's trunk in pure exuberance  
excelling octopus's eight cupped tentacles  
excelling horsefly's centi-milli-spectacles.  
Surpassing even two-horned mug of white rhinoceros  
or yawning yap of toothy hippopotamus.

I cannot look your way my dear  
today or any day of yesteryear  
without seeing in between your eyes  
or posing as your nose, in full disguise,  
or under chin, behind both ears,  
or in your pores (when that full blush appears)  
that *je ne sais quoi* from heart or noggin  
that sets my heart a thumpin', mind a joggin'.

If I could paint the you within your face  
that hides as in a turtle's carapace  
and will not show itself to lens or eye  
except when favored lover passes nigh;  
if I, that lucky Prince of Present Passion,  
could somehow out of clay or marble fashion  
that soul, like star-nosed mole, in astral glory—

I think 'twould make a rather gripping story.

# More Poetry II – by Miles Mathis

poems are listed newest to oldest

## *Swanmaiden*

Anubis-black, the breathless sky blinked its jackal eye  
above the field of darnel, foxglove and rye.  
Along the lane dark cloudberry loomed  
lit only by an antimony Moon  
broomed by wisps of damson-dye.

Obscured by this starry mask, the Swanmaiden  
rose from her tourmaline lake,  
slipping off her robe-damask and feathery crown her troth to seek.  
Thus fate-blessed she quit her tramontine nest.  
Foretold her cygnean life she must forsake, she flew—  
bound to her whispered task—on bleu-blanc wings  
six ells wide to the distant shore of the West.

The cold crawled by her, night refusing to thaw, a helix-en-air  
purling from each wingtip dyadic  
like a honeyed sky-note to the Great Bear  
urging Ursa to crawl from his Cimmerian attic  
to guide her way with his vast paw.

Before the dawn she lit on lofted gable runic-writ.  
Upon the carved wood the words ran thus:  
“Down from above cometh my life.”  
The Swanmaiden smiled, adding five strokes by her curvéd claw:  
“Downy from above cometh my wife.”  
This quietus done she sought an entrance to the warmth.

Such scratching was heard by none within,  
but without it woke the dunlin and weary pipit  
ensconced on their sandy tumuli. Each hatched a tiny greeting  
to their great sister, who heard not. She only tried the planchette  
on the roof; found it latched.

At last she forced a window; stole inside.  
So silently did she tread, a calico cat never raised its head  
but napped still upon the hearth, her fur reflecting orange and red  
from the lightly hissing fire.  
Cramoisie shadows danced on the walls  
sloe-black pools ran down the halls  
while the coals purred like copper wire.

The Swanmaiden found the Master's bed:  
above, her great wings she spread, canopying his dreams with hers.  
Underneath he stirred, cued by the waning Moon not to wake.  
As the cock crowed, swan's form did she forsake,  
his desire fatally linked to a long-necked girl of pallid mien:  
none other could he wed.

### ***Who is This Ghost***

Who is this ghost I seek  
or sylph or fay  
Oh where is she  
this one I've seen  
the long-haired one of shivered limbs  
of shadow eyes  
of downcast day  
of silvered hands and subtle mien  
Why should she only send her sisters  
of false hope  
unlit fairies

Wrecked upon this shallow land  
in penance for what hollow deed  
Shall I find the countermand  
and rein the Apollonian steed  
Or am I stranded utterly  
til she or one like she takes pity  
Is my fate for me to fix  
or must I patiently await the Parcae's hex

Such as these speak when it suits  
not when I beg or pray  
A sentence is served  
not to a fixed day  
but to that word  
and to that thought  
and to that hour when walls dissolve  
and I can walk away

Of all the damnings  
across the lost eternal skies  
of all appointed sorrow  
the sharpest is saved for struck listeners  
encircled by ancient  
and haunted lullabies  
who love not the living most  
who love not the day and the hours  
not the May and the morrow  
but as in an aching dream  
love and love  
an unknown  
unnamed ghost

***You give your love so reluctantly***

The town imagines you a subtle princess  
slight of waist, delicate of wrist  
long-fingered and light-stepped  
Your skirts follow you like hounds  
follow Artemis, rustling and attentive  
Your jewels and speckled bands  
delight the ashram eyes  
and even younger men vie to kiss your sandals

but I know you give your love so reluctantly

Although you smile at the wind  
and seem to seduce the very gods  
with your blue blue irises

and caress your worshipful cats with cool abandon

still I know you give your love so reluctantly

You talk of flying spirits  
and long hot summers of India  
Among the words are tucked unspoken promises  
of a red Arabian night  
Your dreams betray you, for they  
float on golden carpets and dive in warm waters  
and you tell them in satsang, surrounded by your acolytes  
seemingly unaware of their effect

I, who do not tell my dreams,  
but nonetheless dream long and deep  
regretting to wake,  
was fooled  
I had been thrown high by you  
I had walked the clouds  
given assurances, proffered gifts  
and gladly met the myriad demands of a silver princess

Though you were said to be the flower,  
it is I that opened, petal by petal  
Sun-leaning, nodding with the hours,  
Moon-bowing, swaying in the dark  
arms and legs to the four corners

I had made a bed for love  
stuffed it and mended it and canopied it with  
all expectance  
a blanketed refuge from all that is,  
from all that is too much

In a grand gesture, you had blessed it  
chanted, burned your incense  
laid on your decorations of quartz and adamant  
and walked a flourished circle three times  
shedding your sage perfumes

But only I know how reluctantly



you give your love

My hands have built the festooned halls  
in which you glide  
my magic surrounds you  
I have loaned you my devis, and they invisibly  
guard you as you blithely haunt the world  
And so you have grown even more lovely  
flanked by my paintings of you  
wearing clothes from my model's closet  
You have climbed me like a sequined ladder  
and the stars flutter in your celestial hair

But even after all these years  
you give your love so reluctantly

***La Pucelle*** [concerning Joan of Arc]

The white-archangel bloomed high along the lane, nodding to young Jehane  
as she passed, *gentil, complaisant*.  
A rill ran beside, lambent with summer rains, brown below but wan

above, washing with *tourbillons*<sup>1</sup>  
the black woolly rocks. A grey heron, inglenooked in the brook's yellow hay  
eyed her, grimly *conscient*

of the sound of her sabots on the cakéd earth. Nearer still, the quail *des blés*<sup>2</sup>  
bowed in hedgerows, hidden  
among the stars-of-Bethlehem, *la herbe-de-la-saint-Jean*<sup>3</sup>, and *la mauve-musquée*.<sup>4</sup>

They hunched in their feathery pews, well-ridden  
of their normal foxy fears. The virgin's arrival stopped all chase and chasse<sup>5</sup>  
'til the saints be bidden.

Her promenade closed when a dusky warbler brightly warned her of the coming crevasse.  
She had sought this moraine  
as the appointed place, a wild and wind-blown altar for an almost private mass.

The nimble maid of Lorraine  
climbed right down, led by her *fauvette ophée*<sup>6</sup>, plumuled grey. He warbled  
a trilling *chant-montagne*<sup>7</sup>

to bless this *fourre-tout*<sup>8</sup> of the gods, this heap of stone, this mystery-slag unrivalled.  
Nothing followed the pair  
but the white flowers, turning now to asphodel with calyx lightly pebbled

and patches of *campagnon-clair*<sup>9</sup>  
and clusters of *conopode-dénudé*,<sup>10</sup> which Jehane did engarland like baby's breath  
in her still-long hair.

She removed the dented clogs for the final climb, her toes cheating death  
with subtle purchase of the ledge.  
At last she reached the bed, dry and sandy with white shale beneath.

Nearby, tufts of sedge  
followed a fine line of water, fed in silvery webs along cavern walls  
split like a long-drawn wedge.

The friendly warbler left her now, frightened by his own echoing calls,  
replaced by a martinet pâle.  
Far quieter, he patrolled with a balsam whisper, master of these low halls.

The little *hirondelle*<sup>11</sup>  
encircled Jehanne, fashioning her a *chaplet-en-air*<sup>12</sup> with his wind-sharpened wings,  
an implied corolla of the dell

to protect her from all *fées-rustique*.<sup>13</sup> Even so, the maid's silent imaginings  
attracted *les dieux locaux*,<sup>14</sup>  
waiting through centuries for an honest intention. They prepared their hallowings

like a balefire row,  
Michael, Catherine and Margaret in trinal apparition, musing the maid  
into a *rêve-bateau*.<sup>15</sup>

The angels clothed her in *boucassin-blanc*<sup>16</sup> and *ciel-bleu*,<sup>17</sup> her collar of silk inlaid.  
With essence of plum they laved

her hands, and about her feet a bough of *musquet-des-bois*<sup>18</sup> curled and played.

In the folds of her dress ennaved  
were long green needles of cedar and leaves of durmast oak, heavy with signs  
that Orleans and Patay would be saved.

At last they cut the woodbines,  
freeing Jehane from her bosky boat-of-dreams, and sent her back up to the real.  
All that remained were the lines

in her memory, the clear etchings of battle and proof, of providence, signal and seal.  
The maid was now of France,  
her mind a book the angels would write, her body a sword they would anneal.

With a shy and backward glance  
she wondered that Michael and the rest—waylaying her in that heathen deep—  
should send her on the road to Rheims

from an enchanted gap of stone. Why not take her in church, or in devoted sleep,  
under eaves where all Christendom lay?  
Should she henceforth pray under sky and stars, under Sun and Moon, her soul to keep?

But the birds would not say.  
*Le moineau soulcie*<sup>19</sup> was silent; *la tourterelle des bois*<sup>20</sup> only cooed and sighed,  
awaiting the end of day.

So she walked back down her road, guarded by dogrose and danewort and *pomme-epineuse*.<sup>21</sup>  
No Dauphin yet spoke of tests,  
no Cauchon of trials; only the waking owl, crying in the fields like an earless muse,

warning nobly of the nests  
of Englishmen, and of the fourberie<sup>22</sup> of priests, and of the blood-singed brevity of all fierce  
God-appointed quests.

But Jehane had no mind for the prophecy of owls, Merlin though he be. Let them pierce  
her pellucid breast with a dart  
or nail her to a *Vieux Marché* pyre: it would always be her sweet Jhesus who steers

her course and her innocent heart.  
Accepting his summons might lead to bitterest pain, but denying would be far worse.

The maid must play her part.

<sup>1</sup>whirlpools <sup>2</sup>of the wheat <sup>3</sup>St. John's wort <sup>4</sup>musk mallow <sup>5</sup>the hunt <sup>6</sup>Orpheus' warbler, the  
dusky warbler <sup>7</sup>mountain song <sup>8</sup>hold-all, junk pile <sup>9</sup>campion <sup>10</sup>naked cone-foot, St. Anthony's  
nut <sup>11</sup>swallow <sup>12</sup>crown in the air <sup>13</sup>field spirits <sup>14</sup>the local gods <sup>15</sup>dream-boat <sup>16</sup>white fustian  
fabric <sup>17</sup>sky blue <sup>18</sup>lily-of-the-valley <sup>19</sup>rock sparrow <sup>20</sup>turtle dove <sup>21</sup>thorn-apple <sup>22</sup>treachery

### *Asterië*

The sennit in her hat was stolen,  
picked from fields her father did not rent or own—  
a handsel from the petted heifers  
cropping purslane near the edge of town.

Calves in the sedge shied away from the fence  
as she climbed the short hill beyond,  
and the lambs leapt from mayapples offered,  
and the geese flew up from the pond.

She lay that summer's eve on the wold  
scented with chervil and tansy.  
Above her the regions of dusk did unfold  
light-gemmued as a virgin sea.

Her hair burgeoned the rain-cracked rocks  
following the lines of stonewort a-whirl,  
while beetles about her beat paths through the scutch,  
wandering wide in avoid of the girl.

Bat vied with nightjar for greymoth and brown;  
vole gathered orache and hare hid his hyssop—  
all unknown to the dirndled girl on the down  
begging the Moon to come to a stop.

But the Corymb above her continued to climb,  
surrounded by surfeit of sky edelweiss;

and the waters between them bubbled with rime  
and sea wrack and red ramage and spice

flung by the Hunter to coax the sea monsters  
out from their dark caves above the trees.  
She saw his arrows fly, like catkins afire between the stars  
burning out fast in the high cold breeze.

With a sarmentine wand, won from a pollard willow  
she waved at the sky and cast crooked spells  
to bring hydra and draco and both dogs below  
to burn all the houses and dry up the wells.

For her the kine in the fields became wyvern  
choking the village folk with soot.  
For her the cats that haunted the verges were witches  
combing the reeds for henbane and wolfbane and feverroot.

Zevana looked down on this floss-silk girl—  
her clogs, her sisalled arms and legs, her strawbraid brow—  
and sent four owls to rouse her from her curl  
upon the copsy hill: she should not sleep with rook and cow.

She wiped her mind with hexenbesen  
and wet her lips with boneset.  
She lifted her like a bayadère on a dew palanquin  
webbed with briony, and kermoak for a chaplet.

The laverock let them pass with an orgulous look  
from beneath his dark green leaves.  
The yarrow bent and the groundsel shook  
and the hart's tongue licked its bluish greaves.

The girl woke at home with eaves overhead  
and smoke from the peat-tended fire.  
Raffia littered her bed on the floor,  
and her mind danced like silver wire.

But a cricket calmed her, and her sisters' sounds,  
and she rubbed one foot with the other.  
Zevana continued her subtle rounds

and the four owls left with their mother.

### *Ushas Asleep*

The Moon pales bosky  
hugging the tattered rim of the wood  
like a charnel vine, one dim bloom  
above the black.

Smell of charlock deckles  
the wind, and meadow rue arrives  
behind, tainting the squirrel corn  
and sweet mazzard with its tones

Ushas is asleep, curled ophidian  
in some warm cave, her gowns plissé,  
her breath of meliot,  
her zaffre rays reigned in for now.

Knowing this, the sciomancer blows his  
subtle flame to life and greets the golemi  
as they blink and puff, their fingers  
still sticky with dew of deep roots,  
their eyes leaking glaire,  
their heads nine timbrels, all in row.

He bends this coffle with a brew  
of coltsfoot and baneberry,  
bribing them from their brides,  
withy wands unwending them,  
and they ride the night on a brood of ouzel,  
bred to malingering the fogs.

A codling moth patters the rafters  
and rains down dust on the books and naked pages.  
A clock's crystal, chatoyant in the candle's eye,  
places all this in the past  
with each stuttered blink.

As a cruel charivari, the clock and candle  
toast the man and his painted zenana,  
for the golemi, gone to gather all whispers,  
have left their weird wives in a clutch.

The man looks to them, each to each,  
desiring that ones throat, like a wake-robin,  
desiring that ones lip, like carnelian.

One white body he peels from her calyx,  
petal for green petal, til she stands a parian  
parted from the mountain.

Another he limns in air,  
her verge of kaolin umber waxing  
tripetalous, pucelle of chalcedony  
bedded in finest bistre.

Another, hair in carcanet of wood  
anemone, murmurs a make-believe  
*chanson de geste* as counter-mesmer.

But to no avail: he will have her cowl *printemps*  
as well, burning it with the rest.  
Pitiless, he picks her pose as punishment—  
arms overhead.

The last he likes in caput mortuum  
the best. Purply she lies on a long couch, sipping  
blossom tea languidly  
from a terracotta cup.  
It is doubtful she will even look up.

Artemis approves with arrowy glance,  
finally rising steeple-high.  
She cares not for wives, sylphic or no,  
and leads the golemi easterly still  
dumbly driving their dream.

But at last Ushas rolls back the rock,  
cleaving the night from her narrow shoulders.

The wind reverses, waking the plowbirds,  
and the ouzel tip and turn.

The mandrake yawns, the vole scratches,  
and the damselfly drinks a drop of dew,  
tongue like a tiny frond, flicking wet.

The golemwives run from the room,  
slipping under the wainscoting like Walkure mice.  
Quickly they dress themselves in calladia  
and calla lilies, weaving a lie for the nonce.

But their mud-husbands ask nothing,  
seeking the warm soil, sighing a night's-end.  
No beetle above them will trouble their rest.

And he, alone once more, returns to his  
*eau-de-vie*, freeing the chalk from his fingernails.  
He has no oblation for Ushas.  
Artemis, cold and white, distant and undoting  
yet binds him somehow,  
by some roll of the bones  
above or by some sortilege  
from the shore of Cocytus.  
Her whoredom vierge  
has become his hymn.

### ***The Cypress Wife***

Melissa brushed the flaxseed from her draped hair  
O mallow mallow and malmsey  
and picked the bluebells from her skirts  
and ladyfern and thistle.

She walked a'home through moonlight and coppice  
Sing mallow and yellow malmsey  
Unshoed through ponygrass and willow  
and horsetail and rushes.



She thought "I be seed vessel and him wind fellow"  
O mallow mallow and malmsey

A lacewing brushed Melissa's darksome face  
and greenly paced the air around her.  
Melissa licked the night for passing ghosts  
and whispered mallow mallow.

The moisture messed her netherhair  
and made her silver legs move nicely  
slipping noiseless and mothy and lissome  
O mallow mallow and malmsey.

"Great Cypress!" called she to a massive tree  
"for one more kiss of him I'd marry thee!"  
And Cypress listened to poor Melissa  
sing mallow and yellow malmsey

She kissed her fellow by bulrush and weed  
and eelgrasss and pussywillow.  
And turned to white wife of swaying Cypress  
sighing mallow mallow.

### ***My Last Love***

My last love  
slept on a blue pad  
in a sea of books

I moved them off  
rustling in their jealous stacks  
to make room for me

They waited like shorebirds  
for the wave to pass

### ***The Merman*** *(a sestina)*

I dreamt a river of yellow hair  
my bed but a mermaid thought  
a bark of rushes  
Your webby claws raked the raw silt, the silk black weeds  
my tongue swam in circles~silvery fish  
and death was green

I dreamt a hard sky, turtleback green  
the moon a face without hair  
"There I lie and fish,  
reedpoles my arms, casting up to the green." I thought,  
"I am a tree, roots among the weeds  
among rushes."

I dreamt a white island, by rushes  
encrypt. An egg among green  
feathers, mossgreen weeds  
There you woke like a nestling, preened your downy hair  
with pearly currycombs that I thought  
were bones of fish

I dreamt a greensea of vase-shaped fish  
or "cellos from which rushes  
fish music," I thought.  
They plucked a long wavering whalesong of death green  
and silkblack, on strings of yellow hair  
long goldenweeds.

I dreamt a muddy cave, mouth of weeds  
clumped with sparrowbones and fish  
eyes and matted with hair  
soft under white toes like a floor of wet rushes  
or riverbed rocks beneath feltgreen  
moss. Then I thought

"And this cave is but a mermaid thought  
fisheyes ensconced in silkweeds  
on walls of blue-green  
algae, a ceiling of pearl-white shells." And I fish  
there for dreams among the black rushes  
the yellow hair

where you are an otter seeking fish  
and I a green rushclad merman combing the weeds  
for death or a thread of maidenhair.

### *Applewood*

The dead may air an applewood of greenrippling bark  
their bed of dark  
below a brown bough  
shady where it stood  
in a white wood  
shiny with the moon  
blue

Or leaves may dance an orange turn round roots above  
a winding move  
through clay black grey and dust  
and finger the sleep  
from those down deep  
dead

Some dig dirt and taste sienna-yellow sap  
like mother's lap  
Some spread wide in violet-sacred matricide  
of fallen earth  
this bloody birth  
red

But silver-rimmed graves in applewood know children too  
hills not new  
I sleep on overarching grass  
an apple canopy  
is all I see  
you

### *Iron Taboo*

She buried her hair  
there below boards seven ells deep  
safe with a needle her goldenthread

iron eye dazzling the dead  
from her head  
asleep

Our bed was straw  
She spun it yellow night by night  
and covered the weft with dead red leaves  
the branches she tied into sapless sheaves  
torches she weaves  
alight

A garden she dug  
wet with sweetbrier, white eglantine  
Propped up a grey groom legged in vine  
priest-king with a penny  
of her makeshift croft  
pumpkinhead  
aloft

Her hair lay long  
like orphrey collar on moss-rose neck  
The limetree hung her broadcloth dress  
her nest of silk whipstitch  
over muddy knees  
apart

She buried the child  
deep between roots where the river winds  
the bones a mother hides no one finds  
and built for a boat a willow bier  
knotted with hair  
her own hands  
asteer

The curragh she sailt  
brownbourn down rindle to sea  
river daughter yet mouthing a digging song  
and threw a spoon to oceanrift  
In flaxen bindweed seven ells deep  
I sleep  
adrift

### ***Death is an Otter***

Death is an otter  
swimming rings around the moon  
river daughter writing runes around the sun

Life is a fish  
gills wide in flight from webby paws  
scaled son-of-stars, stippled child of middlenight

Death is a bear  
dancing a buzzing whirlpool, fur fearless  
and honeycomb drunk

Life is a bee  
pollen-dusted in sexy flower hop  
unaware of ursa dipping overhead

### ***Little Bird***

Where dost thou flutter  
Little bird  
What is thy song  
little heard  
Dost thou tumble from bracken fern  
all the mornings fog to burn  
lowly aloft on redgold heath  
breakfast bugs astir beneath  
naught but vapors up above  
which languishing night but now unwove  
Will I see thee again at dusk  
sleekened by thy daily rusk  
or shall I lose thee to the claw  
the all devouring, time's great maw.

### ***October***

The harvestman prancing on whinneying air  
shooting the dappled pumpkins king of the Moon

Where are the Wiccans tresses a testing the loom  
will she spin long silver thread to steal my ghost  
Or must I run waters through greygrass and the brown  
leaflimbs slender as a spiderleg

Dig deep cicadabug chew quietly locustlady  
Apollo seeks you from the silent side  
to burn your wings to singe your freckled carapace  
it will not do to sleep  
or tongue your earthy womb

Make an offering child of dust  
on the rooted altar at river's edge  
Delve your drinking hands elbow-deep in brackish blue  
and weave a worm from maker's mud

and splay your dancing line longlegged  
into wind

### ***For Mary***

Like death your eyes go deep and grey  
Their marble tastes of breath and sleep  
and patient black and cold-ash clay

Your hands raw willowroots a-sway  
White limbs move lithe and long-a-sweep  
and eyes go deep like death and grey

Winterberry lips do curl away  
round mine more murmur and creep  
Go deep like death eyes of grey.

### ***Mio Caro Leonardo da tuo padre***

O do not think, my lovely boy—  
fair face framed in ringlet curls,  
silk o'er citrus-alabaster skin—  
such angel's drape will cover shape  
from Devil's dreams or worldly sin:  
such beauty here—no heaven's coin—  
will buy you only Papish looks  
and claws of fifty-year-old girls.

O do not think, my lovely boy—  
hand with flowing line of God  
following lithe Nature's willow curve  
in perfect mirror Ess of Soul—  
such divine amanuensis is required here.  
Rome translates this snake as backward script,  
sinister sign of Adam's fall  
and Eve's corrupting curves.

O do not think, my lovely boy—  
blacks aglow with atmospheric white  
and brightest light subdued in shadow's glaze—  
such subtlety, line to tint and colored edge,  
will capture eye, confined by gaze  
to straightened sight, chiaroscuro  
shading depth for sons of Lazarus  
accustomed to Sepulchral tones.

O do not think, my lovely boy—  
strumming lute like fretted swan  
or piping flute (a childish toy)—  
Polyhymnia is worshipped yet.  
Muses, Graces, Fates and Furies were pitched  
from Milvian Bridge and drowned:  
and water-walker solemnly wades—  
does not dance or sing or finger his kithara.

O do not think, my lovely boy—  
mind outstripping history's coils,  
thinking thoughts Medieval men mistake,  
seeing solid air uplift your wings

and gaseous rock, Madonna's vale,  
containing as much Sky as Earth,  
matter sprinkled wide in Pallas' birth  
like gems in Heaven's veil—

O do not think, my lovely boy,  
such musing makes one better.  
Blood and veins and scattered bones  
are death's concern: Nero may fiddle  
as Christians burn, his song and salt  
a pyramid of dust that time erodes.  
God will outlast Giza waiting  
for the Sphinx to tell its riddle.

O do not think, my lovely boy,  
perfection is the point: Paul reserved  
your place for penitent sinners.  
Unabsolved clay cullers, scrabbling in the mud,  
picking fruit from Mother's breast,  
tasting tree for seeds of immortality,  
will never tithe the Trinity  
or earn a place in Paradise.

Put away your paints and pray, Mi Fili.  
Give up your Ge and learn Theology.  
With your right hand reach inside,  
exorcise the demons of your bet.  
We know too well you traded hell  
for all your Mother's bounty.  
But She will never save you, Bastard Child.  
Christ and you cannot be reconciled.

### ***Dig***

Dig deep beneath your bed, sleeping one—  
The soil is warm and sandy and flies  
like mist from hands that claw and feet that run.

You will find, if you go deep below



beyond the lowest catacombs that sigh  
beyond the pale eidola, rocking to and fro,  
You will find a room, walled in green so high  
roofed in blue so mystery-sheer  
warmed by red and floored soft  
lit by yellow and watered clear,  
and here you will curl in shapes of round  
here the skin will smell of milk and sweat  
here the breath and heart will sound  
here all friends are found and met.

Crawl up to the moon, sleeping one—  
Swim by clouds that brush your cheek, like spiderwebs,  
lost forever from the brooming sun.  
Feel the tide that thrusts and ebbs  
lofting you into the white arms,  
the cold blue light, the shivering vault.  
Here pain freezes, memory never harms,  
yesterday is lost, the past is salt.

Penetrate the walls, confound the maze, sleeping one—  
You are not confined by day's hard lines,  
only night's fine confusion, a net that none  
need suffer—none, that is, that time resigns.  
Look upon the horned monsters, won't you,  
as they hoof their fateful lanes of dust.  
As they must roam and chase and ravage too,  
so you look and tremble and weep, you must.

But when the weeping's done then slay the beast.  
Lick your sword and laugh a creature's oath,  
repeat it 'til the blood and fur have ceased  
then to the subtle fires haul them both.

## “Postwar” Art

*by Miles Mathis*



One of the lead stories at Yahoo today (11/9/2006) was an Associated Press article by Ula Illytzyk entitled “Postwar Art Auction nets \$491 Million in Sales.” This was a lead story since that monetary figure is an auction house record, by a large margin. Most people aren’t too interested in art, but they are always interested in a dollar sign with the word “million” after it.

I myself clicked on the link for other reasons. I am not too interested in postwar art—and the same can be said for money—but knowing what I do about postwar art, I was surprised to see it setting an auction record. One glance at the first paragraph of the article surprised me even more, since I was immediately greeted with the name Gustav Klimt. Scanning the other paragraphs I found the names Schiele, Kirchner, Gauguin, and Picasso. In fact, these were the *only* artists’ names in the article.

There was not one postwar artist mentioned, and it was unclear, without further research, whether Christie's "postwar" auction included any postwar art at all.

The term "postwar" is generally used to refer to art created after 1945, since, according to recent research, the Second World War may have ended in that year. Or not. I mean it is hard to prove anything absolutely. There is a sliver of a chance that all the documentation and photos and gravestones were faked, but I think I can state without fear of contradiction that there is bipartisan agreement that WW2 ended in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, sometime after WW1 ended.

Now, according to research that is just as widely accepted, Gauguin died in 1903, Klimt and Schiele died in 1918, Kirchner died in 1938, and Picasso died in 1973. That means that Picasso is the only artist mentioned that survived into the postwar era. Unfortunately, the artwork mentioned in the article is Picasso's "Portrait of Angel Fernandez de Soto," which is a Blue Period painting. The Blue Period ended in 1904, so unless Christie's or Ms. Ilnytsky is referring to the Second Boer War, we are still not "postwar."

It would appear from all this that American high-schoolers are not the only ones who can't place historical figures in the proper decades or even the proper centuries. According to Christie's, the Associated Press, and Yahoo, Gauguin's "Man with an Ax," from 1891, is now considered to be "postwar." World War Two is now believed by some to have occurred in 1890 or before.

Or maybe I am reading the headline wrong. Maybe Ms. Ilnytsky means that the auction itself is postwar, since it happened this week. The editors at Yahoo and the Associated Press can't be expected to read her mind: I mean, for heaven's sake, 2006 is after 1945, so what's the problem?

But seriously, the reason I think this is important—why it is not just a joke—is that I really believe it was done on purpose. This headline was not a mistake. It was not added later by some bonehead who knows nothing of history. Christie's and Ms. Ilnytsky and lots of other art industry insiders would be perfectly content if a majority of readers thought that postwar art was setting sales records. That fiction is probably the thing they most want—the thing they are asking Santa to put in their stockings. Therefore, when I see it in a headline, I cannot think it is an accident. It is just another piece of very bald propaganda. It is both a trial balloon (to see how stupid the audience has become) and an intended mistake. A disingenuous "oops!" If it gets printed in a newspaper, that paper may have to print a correction; but they can bury the correction somewhere, knowing that many fewer will read the correction than will have read the original headline. But on the internet, no corrections are printed, not anywhere. Have you ever seen Yahoo or AOL or MSN print a correction or retraction? I haven't. This means that most people will be left with the immediate impression that postwar art is setting auction records, and they will continue to think it until they are corrected personally by me or by the few thousand other people who know better. The odds of that happening are very low, so the writer of the headline wins.

Modernism is based on a million kinds of misdirection, and this is just one of them. What we have here is the creation of an ever-increasing circle of confusion. The art market requires that the buyer be as indiscriminate and ill-informed as possible. So he or she is fed a truly stupendous amount of false or nonsensical information. While the buyer is trying to sort through all this, the seller takes that opportunity to stir the product some more. The galleries and auction houses want to match the prices of late 20<sup>th</sup> century art to the prices of early 20<sup>th</sup> century art and late 19<sup>th</sup> century art, so they gather it all into the same pot, call it by the same name, and try to pass it off as basically equivalent. This is why we are told that Modernism started way back with the Impressionists. Impressionism is, as a whole, the most expensive period ever to exist in art, so of course the salesmen want to start their pitch there. According to this pitch, the Impressionists were new and exciting, they were great thinkers and they influenced everyone we love and admire, up to Madonna and Shaggy. The world basically began with Impressionism, and you can write off everything before that as old-fashioned, brown and grey, regressive, and, you know, like totally *not* sexy. Then the salesman creates a direct line of descent from those big sellers to all the other big sellers, ultimately reaching those living artists whom he hopes to make the next big sellers.

What you, the buyer, are supposed to understand is that a big name is a big name, whether it belongs to Monet, Gauguin, Picasso, Warhol, or Hirst. It is like a shell game, where your eyes have to be kept off the main action, by whatever ruse. In both the shell game and the art game, this is achieved mainly by a constant line of annoying chatter. Your brain is turned into jelly by the tintinnabulation of a million words, and your eyes can do nothing but fold back in your head, leaving your money unprotected on the table.

These articles from Christie's and Sotheby's and the like achieve their purpose insidiously, since after a while a normal person will give up. Presented with an infinite line of lies, a person eventually just has to say, "What does it matter? Postwar, post-coital, post-menopausal, it is all the same. I am rich, just take my bid and leave me alone with my expensive purchase. I don't care when WW2 ended or when Gauguin went to Tahiti or when the Great Auk went extinct. I'm not claiming to be a fucking genius, I just want my name in the paper. I want to have things on the wall to point to and talk about when I am drunk, I want hookers to look at me with saucer eyes when I tell them how much it is worth, I want my expensive alarm system to be doing something besides guarding my Callaway Big Berthas, my complete Simpson's collection and my wife's 200 pairs of shoes."

In this situation, the art becomes completely interchangeable, and that is just the way the market wants it. Look at the photos that are always run with these auction house stories. In a logical universe, or in a world where people actually cared a whit about art, you would be shown a close-up of the painting. But go to the Yahoo article and notice what photos ran there. We see three photos. In the first, a famous Klimt can be seen hazily in the background; but in the foreground and in tight focus we see the phonebank, where half a dozen nattily dressed salespeople are taking bids directly from billionaires too important to even show up. In the second photo we see the auctioneer in a tux, gesticulating like a concert conductor. In the third we see a handsome woman looking at a long line of magnificently framed and presented works. Unfortunately, we are at such an angle that all we can see

are the frames and walls and the woman. The frames could be empty and we would never know the difference. But that is OK, since most of them are as good as empty, and since the average reader will be more impressed by the frames anyway.

As another example, go to the major magazines that promote and sell Modernism. Most of the ads will just be a name and a gallery. It has been like that for many decades. It isn't about the art. It is the name and the price. And if you can stir the names up enough, then the price will be interchangeable, too. First you call everything postwar art, then you call everything avant-garde art, then maybe for a few years you call everything poststructural art or post-Imperial art or postcolonial or postmodern or post-toasty. It doesn't really matter. You just want to destroy boundaries and all logic. Once you have achieved that, then you can start the bidding at ten million for every object created since 1860. Some 20-year-old kid can come in with a swastika made out of used Sucrets and Tictacs, you can call it postwar art, and the guys in tuxes at the phonebanks at Christies will soon be swamped by billionaires.

In fact, it is actually very difficult to parody these people, since no matter how ridiculous I make my examples, they aren't ridiculous enough to qualify as exaggeration. The guys in tuxes at the phonebanks have, in real life, already been swamped by billionaires for artworks that were less substantial than my Tictac Swastika. I was sitting at my computer for a whole minute trying to come up with something faintly amusing, but for almost a century hundreds of thousands of artists have been sitting around doing precisely the same thing. Despite spending much more time on the project than I did, and getting paid much better, few were able to come up with anything more potent than the Tictac Swastika. For you see that this is what art has become. Damien Hirst's whole career is sitting around trying to find that thing that is least like art, so that he can call it art and be seen as novel. The Chapman brothers do the same thing, and thousands of other "artists". This line of art might be called post-Duchamp art.

It might be except that the market no longer wants to make distinctions like that. The market wants all saleable art to be in the same category. That's why we don't hear as much about -isms these days. "Pluralism" is the last important -ism, and that includes everything. The -isms served their marketing purpose historically, since they sold the world on the importance of novelty. But marketing has since become more sophisticated. It was realized sometime in the 90's that -isms created schisms, and that schisms created winners and losers. The art market wants only winners. Anything that it agrees to hang should be a smashing success, and smashing successes aren't created by cut-throat competition. Therefore, everything that is accepted by the major galleries and auction houses is now incorporated into one overarching concept: Modernism. That is to say, it is good art, in the way that Monet-Cezanne-Picasso-Pollock-Warhol-Johns-Rauschenberg-Freud is good. It is good because it is famous or soon-to-be-famous. And it is famous or soon-to-be famous because it is very expensive.

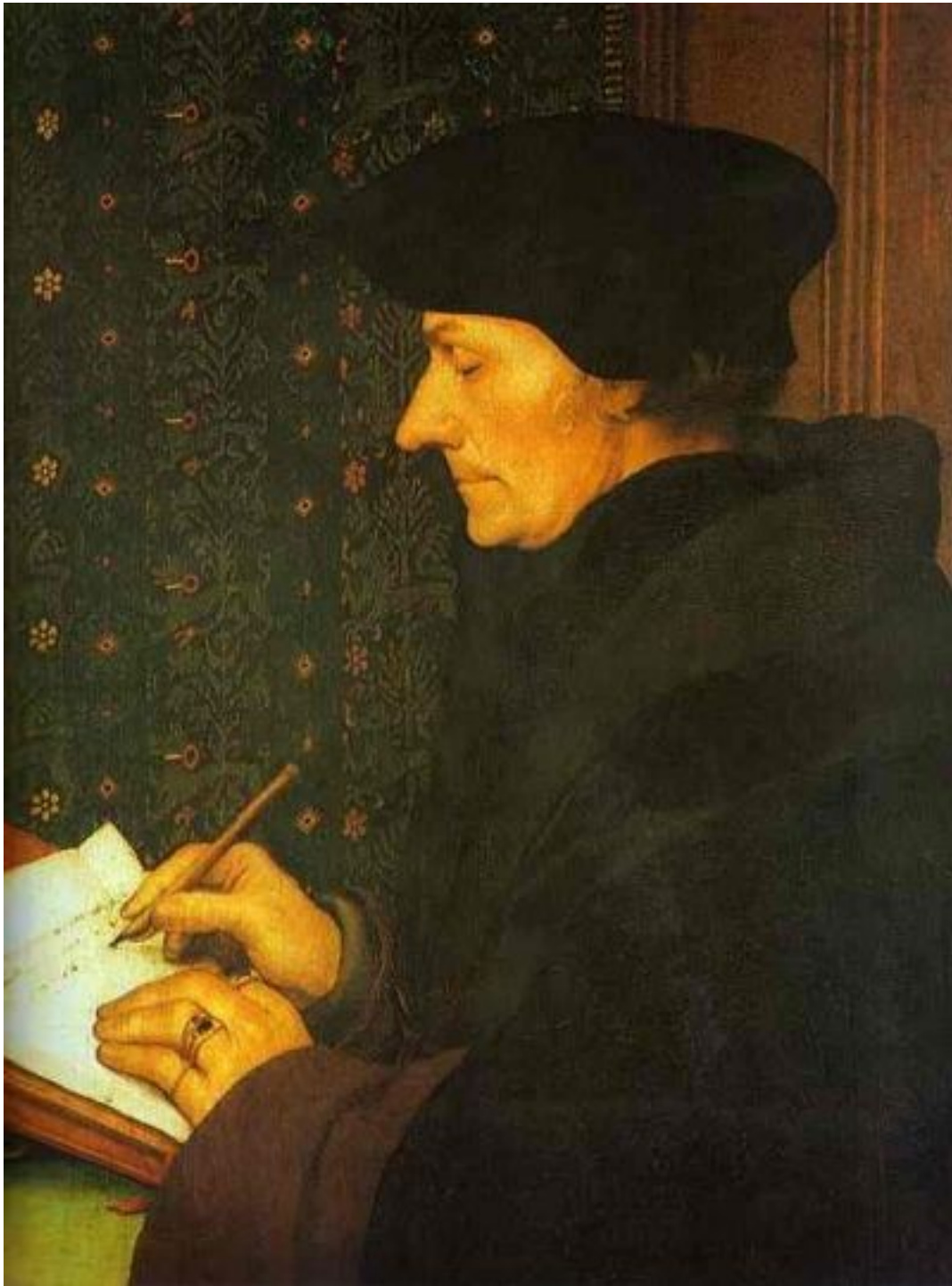
And this is why Klimt is "accidentally" called postwar. The audience is being accustomed to further non-distinction and non-discrimination. Any image that you see hanging behind a bunch of guys in tuxedos at a phonebank talking to billionaires is an image to remember, and to bow down before, no matter what it is. And as an image, it is strictly equivalent to any other image you see in the

same place. It is a “super-commodity”, a grand totem, a cultural icon, and as such is beyond your comprehension, judgment, or understanding. Only a billionaire can afford it and only an expert can tell you what to think of it. So back off, buddy! Don’t make me call a guard!

[return to 2005](#)

# The Practical Artist

*by Miles Mathis*



It is possible that some few may get the joke just from reading the title. How could I, of all people, propose to write an article about the “practical artist?” I might as well propose to give stock tips or advice on breast feeding. As it happens, I have no plans to counsel anyone on pragmatism. I am on this page to point out, in characteristically semi-winsome terms, the impossibility of any such beast as a practical artist.

The bookstore shelves are groaning under the weight of artistic how-to books. Anyone who has had the misfortune to wander the aisles of the modern bookstore knows that a proportion nearing one hundred percent of these how-to books concern how to “make it” as an artist. Even the ones that are supposed to be about technique have chapters on making it. And the chapters on technique concern learning a technique that will help you make it. Given this, a contrarian might ask why one never sees a book about **not** making it. If our culture is so bent on fairness, on multiculturalism, on equal time and so on, why do we not have one single book on how to avoid success in the market? *How to be a scrupulous, idealistic, hopelessly romantic artist who thinks the market is a clueless ill-bred whore*. That is the title I sought and I got no help from the staff.

I have to wonder that the world does not stutter and stumble to see the words “practical” and “artist” together at all, in any context. Could there be a more transparent oxymoron? What use has society or history for a practical artist? Artists have never been paid for practicality. Do we remember artists for their practicality? Do we read books about the practical artists of the past, to sit in amaze at their feats of bookkeeping? Do we rush to films about Renaissance artists, to see their swashbuckling Technicolor lives of paying bills on time and raising mannered happy children? Would Cellini be more memorable in a buzzcut and bow-tie? Is Leonardo remembered for his bank account? Michelangelo for his summer cottages and IRA’s? Van Gogh for his balanced portfolio of T-bills and mutual funds? Do we care if Picasso was fully insured or if Munch had regular dental check-ups?

Of course, to put it in these terms I have already betrayed myself as an old-fashioned sort of very-strange-person. No one chooses a profession, or acts in any way whatsoever, to be of use to society or history. Practical people do what they do to be of use to themselves, and, if they are exceedingly thoughtful and kind, maybe to their immediate family. What they may sell to others, and how useful it may be in the long run or short, is not the question. The question is what they bring home. Not what is stored away in the annals of time, but what is stored away in the bank. Not what is its value, but what is its price. A thing of no value at all may fetch quite a high price, and often does; while the thing of highest value is given away for free. This situation is of some concern to the idealist, since he recognizes it for what it is. To the pragmatist it means nothing, or it means dinner and new car.

It used to be that a person became an artist because he could not stomach being a businessman. He could not, in good conscience, sell what he was required to sell. But the businessmen finally coopted that field, too, since idealism could be faked as easily as a conscience, and since talent, as a barrier to commerce, could be got rid of too. Some philosophical muddle could be introduced to confuse the issue, and while everybody was scratching their heads, the thief could make off with the pie. It had



been done thousands of times in history. No doubt it will be done over and over until the seas swallow up the land.

So now we have the age of the practical artist. The businessman as artist. The walking oxymoron. It starts as a PR contest and ends as a cash contest, *Forbes* and *ARTnews* giving us the same sort of ranking based on the same standard. It may make sense, of a sort, to rank bankers or stockbrokers on the pile of coins they sit upon, but artists? You might as well judge chickens by how much milk they produce or fish by how much they can benchpress.

The natural job of the artist is to produce exquisite things. But the gods never guaranteed a market for exquisite things. The recognition of an exquisite thing of course requires an exquisite taste, and the ascendant philosophical muddle teaches that an exquisite taste is something to be rooted out, like a cancer. An exquisite taste, no matter how come by, is like a third ear. Whether you were born with it or acquired it by some strange accident, it can only cause staring and pointing. Best to keep it in a box and don it only at night, undercovers, lest people think you are a reversion or a pestilence.

Imagine some mischievous angel who visits spirits before birth, informing the pre-babes that they will be artists. But they must choose. Since they cannot be both, would they rather be very successful and wealthy, but lacking all talent; or would they rather have an eye for true beauty, and a name that lived through all history, but be unknown in their lifetime? It is clear what choice the practical artist has made. He has traded the reality of being an artist for the name. He has sold his talent and bought a pension, that he and his children might never suffer from want. Not til the years are counted and the money spent will he and his shallow offspring recognize that they wanted all of importance. The idealist artist lived a real life and created real works, while they only spent the inheritance.

Once the choice is well-made and the covenant sealed, all is set for the practical artist. The galleries and buyers are all practical people, so the trio swims along together in a waveless sea, stroke to stroke. The first produces the simulacrum of art, the second sells it and the third buys it, all quite happy with themselves for their cleverness at being part of such a creative scene. None are abashed that the Muse is nowhere represented, that nothing that is exquisite is involved, that art has dissolved and leaked into the air, escaping on an ill-wind. The practical trio has no third ear among them, no least clue of the exquisite. Its presence does not thrill them, its absence cannot abash them. The only presence that thrills them is the presence of the Muse Fiscalia. The other Muses arrive at night, slipping silently from the gloom with a subtle kiss. Fiscalia falls from the rafters like a drunken harlot, bejeweled and bedecked in loud colors and noises and tickertape. This is the entertainment they seek, the revelry they pay for and can understand.

And now, in the US, we have that strangest of all beasts in the current menagerie of oxymorons and paradoxes: the Republican artist. The party of practicality is supported by the practical artist. He hires the government to protect his investment from taxation and redistribution. But has no one thought to apply a bit of logic to this absurd situation? Has no one recognized that, even now, we pay the artist to

provide passion and emotion and scruple? Though the passion has become bloody and the emotion black, the scruple is still evident even when it is being faked. The excuse for the blood and the black is ultimately the socio-politics it props up. In short, you are being preached at, albeit in very strange words and images. Now, what sensible person hires preachers and prophets and other passionate persons, when these persons are caught in their off hours talking or caring about investments and tax shelters? It would be like hiring engineers who cast runes or like hiring claims adjusters who proceeded by divine inspiration.

Artists are not practical by nature. What makes them artistic is that they are *not* practical. That is, they do not judge things by any economic standard. They care nothing for economics, since economics is the most soulless study, and they are interested mainly in soul. They may also have a practical side, as the classical artists had, but they limit this practicality to their study of technique. Beyond technique, they understand that art has nothing to do with practicality. The van Eycks and Durer and Titian and so on were masters of technique, and therefore masters in *practice*. But in choosing a subject and in expressing that subject, they were not at all practical. The beautiful and the exquisite, the subtle and the mysterious, were their guides.

The exquisite was never achieved by any economic considerations, by any cost-benefit analysis. It is achieved by following another road altogether, a road unmapped by the practical artist. This road leads to a land watered by no streams of gold, no coins are in the fountains there, the kine are not fattened on credit. An artist upon this road, traversing this strange land, has no memory of investments or taxation or any petty fiscal politics whatever. He plucks the fruit from the burthened branches at hand with no thought for the future. He scribbles in the dirt the necessary figures and forms, because they are the ones that must go there. He does not paint into a glittering frame or pre-measure the walls. The frames and walls can be got anyhow.

This all goes to say that if you thoroughly Modern people find your lives lacking romance and passion, perhaps it is because you are paying the wrong suppliers. You have hired the practical artists, the Hollywood pimps and gallery hacks and music-machine mavens who mass produce your paltry passions. Your dreams and desires are prefabricated in photoshop and CGI. You are enriching a class of phonies who do nothing but impoverish you. Real artists cannot be bothered to spend 95% of their time promoting themselves and kissing the asses of galleries and critics. They exist in the unmapped land, where such things do not pertain. They are lying in the lap of the Muse, being sweetly schooled in the exquisite. They cannot waste candle sending you fliers and glowing reviews, studying your throw pillows and your curtains, having their picture taken with celebrities.

If you desire to share in the exquisite, you do not have to follow the real artist all the way into the unmapped land. It can be disorienting in there for someone used to blue skies and sunny verandas. But you do have to get out of the house and poke around a bit. You cannot expect the practical people in your service to arrive with exquisiteness on a tray. They know less than you about exquisiteness or any unmapped lands. You have to go to some real artists' studios, studios that hedge the unmapped land.

Not well-known artists, for the well-known artists are the practical ones, the ones with signs on the door. Do a small bit of work for your exquisite meal. Tramp about a bit in strange streets. Follow hints and clues of other odd persons. And have patience. You will see much that displeases you and some that distresses you. But among this motley band of hooded and cloaked travelers on the forest's edge, you will find a true companion of the Muse. A thin and ghostly image, perhaps, who may or may not be able to speak well of himself. But he will have your exquisite dream, the thing that delights your eye or ear. That token of a world you thought lost. That spark of your own discarded passion.

# PROVERBS

*by Miles Mathis*



George Orwell's *Homage to Catalonia* begins with a quote from Proverbs (xxvi. 5-6):

“Answer not a fool according to his folly, lest thou be like unto him. Answer a fool according to his folly, lest he be wise in his own conceit.”

Like much of the King James version, this is difficult to make sense of. Most readers have passed it off as either typical Biblical contradiction or as esoteric teaching. That is, it is either dismissed completely as bunkum or treated as a type of Zen koan, purposely paradoxical. Orwell did not bother to re-translate it for us, so it is equally difficult to tell what he himself made of it. Did he see clear meaning in it, or was he impressed by its apparent esoteric nature? No one knows, but I suspect the latter. There is no real reason for it to be in this form, since this form is unnecessarily confusing. Anyone who saw clear sense in it would re-translate it for his reader, like I am about to do for you.

The problem is that this teacher (Solomon) recommends you do A and not do A. You cannot do both at the same time. The solution is that the word that means “according to” in Hebrew has (at least) two different meanings. Most words, even today, have more than one meaning. Originally, Solomon's recommendation, written in this way, was clever because it played on the two meanings of the word. But since the play on words was lost either in the Greek or English translation, the proverb no longer makes sense. The phrase “according to” in English does not have a clear dual meaning, one that we can apply to this set of sentences. The translation should be something like this:

Answer not a fool *with* his (own) folly, lest thou be like unto him. But do answer a fool *in* his folly, lest he be wise in his own conceit.

You see, it took almost nothing to turn a Zen koan into a simple declarative teaching. We turned one word a quarter-turn, and rewrote history.

Now, I am not a Biblical scholar, and don't claim to be. I am not even a Christian or Jew. I simply like problem solving. I have not shared with you some analysis I read somewhere: I did this one on my own. You will have to accept or reject it on its own merits, not on authority or someone's degree in theology. I don't know what the word for “according to” is in Hebrew, and don't care. I saw intuitively what the problem was here, and made the tweak directly, finding an explanation for it after the fact. I did this because I was interested in the recommendation. I was interested in it as a sensible teaching, not as a Zen koan. I am not a Buddhist or a Zen master, and have no interest in paradoxes—except an interest in avoiding them.

In my opinion, this teaching has a great deal of merit, and that is why I am on this page today, casting words out into the wind of the world. Solomon did not get to be king, or a wise man of any kind, by letting fools jabber on unanswered. And yet, his teaching is the opposite of the modern teaching and of the New Testament teaching. In the contemporary world, where everyone has a right to his or her opinion, it is considered old-fashioned, intemperate, and even egotistical to reply to fools. Better to turn the other cheek, or to ignore them and hope they go away.

This interests me personally, of course, since I hear a lot of recommendations of this sort. Both my websites and a large part of my life is devoted to answering fools, so I get a lot of email from people accusing me of being egotistical, opinionated, tyrannical, undemocratic, sour, jealous, and so on. In their modest opinions, all the words I write can only come from ego and bitterness. Even when they have to admit some truth in my writings, they say I would be better off silent, since I am only answering a fool, and looking foolish in doing so.

Well, I now have Solomon on my side. These meek who have inherited the Earth, in Biblical deed, must admit that the Bible does not always recommend meekness. Either by my new translation, or by the old, Solomon tells us to answer fools, lest they think they are wise in their own *conceit*. Take note of that last word! It is the fools that are conceited, not the ones who answer them. Putting a fool in his place is neither conceited nor egotistical, it is wisdom. In fact, it is so wise it has been a Biblical proverb for thousands of years.

My critics will say, “But it is the way you do it, with so much unnecessary flair and gusto, as if you are enjoying it. No one who did not think much of himself would be caught looking that way in public!” That is the sour grapes itself, not anything I say or do. If we get rigorous about what “sour grapes” means, we find it does not mean “answering fools.” It also does not mean, “answering fools who are

richer than you.” No, it means bitterness or resentment due to another person's achievements or belongings, which is very near “criticizing a person for doing things with flair, because you yourself of incapable of flair.” Flair is not allowed in the modern world, I realize, but the modern world is a mouse. I am not concerned with what the modern world allows or does not allow. To answer anybody takes a great deal of confidence, but that does not make the confidence the same as conceit. When Solomon answers his fools, does he not do it with flair, must he not have confidence? He has belittled another man, yes, but it was a man who deserved and required belittling. By the modern argument, every possible winner in debate, every possible wise man, is an egomaniac.

I will even go further. I will admit to having an ego, and not a smallish one. But again, I say, so what? The Buddha would never have bothered to answer his disciples, except that he found he had something to say. To keep his head above water, yea, to open his mouth more than a morsel, a man has always needed to think highly of himself. People who don't respect and like themselves don't answer anybody. They stay at home and watch TV. They go to work and take orders without question. They come home and take orders without question. They vote without question. They think within narrow lines. The modern recommendation of “modesty” has always seemed to me to be a recommendation of complacency and weakness. A wise humility is an understanding of who you really are, a recognition of your human limits and of your place in the natural hierarchy, where you are but another hairy creature with legs. But this humility is not a requirement that you remain shackled and silenced, head bowed and eyes averted. Nor is it a requirement that you accept the decisions of the marketplace without question.

That is perhaps the nut of the argument. Those who find me insufferable will answer, “Still, there is not a great deal of difference between *answering fools who are richer than you* and *sour grapes*. You are on a razor's edge, as usual. You are rationalizing to suit your own agenda.” You are free to find me insufferable (after you meet me), but not because I respond to the world, not because I defend myself, and not because I do it with flair. Notice that Solomon did not say it was wisdom to answer poorer fools, but bitterness to answer richer fools. In fact, poorer fools are in less need of answer, since they have less influence. It is the rich fools who are in most need of answer.

And if you are going to answer these rich fools, you best do it with all the flair you can muster. David did not attack Goliath with modesty. He did not aim for the elbow or the ankle, to allow Goliath to leave the field with his self-respect intact. He aimed right between the eyes, with the heaviest rock he could fit in his sling.



But that is the difference between then and now. Then, David walked off the field of battle to cheers. He was an immediate and permanent hero, loved for his flair. Now he would walk off the field to a lawsuit. He would be jailed for excessive force, for vigilantism, for cyberbullying or assault with a deadly weapon. He would be accused of luck and false bravado, mocked for thinking he could prevail where larger men had fallen. He would be hated for his youthful figure and his curly hair, his insolent assuredness and his trust in the fates. If he prevailed in court, he would be sent to Hollywood, the only place pretty boys are allowed to prosper. After age 30, he would be offered a part on *Big Brother*, where the nation could watch his public deflation with undisguised glee. The IRS would audit him yearly, as payback for his fame, and take his sling for back taxes. At age 50, he would appear on *Oprah*, fat and bald and broken, and ask forgiveness for his impetuosity and elan. Democratized at last, he would get a nose job and a face lift and a subscription to *TIME* magazine, where his obituary would appear just beneath that of Gary Coleman.

All this is not beside the point on an art site, or on an art site that defends realism against the avant garde. I fled to Taos, New Mexico, two years ago, only to find that Taos was being taken over by the avant garde. I arrived just in time to find the Harwood Museum being finally engulfed by “pluralism” (a euphemism for nihilism), after decades of teetering on the brink. Although Taos has been famous for almost a century for its brightly colored landscapes and paintings of the Pueblos (both the buildings and the people), the media is now dominated by the propaganda of Modernism. Dennis Hopper and Dave Hickey are the fools of the moment, wallowing in vast pits of muddy conceit. The whole of 2009 and half the ink of the *Taos News* has been devoted to their greater glory, all of it completely unanalyzed

and unchallenged ([except for](#) my [small contribution](#)). Even here, where most of the past and present is represented by realism, we have the town museum now guarded by one of Bill Barrett's awful aluminum Manhattan totem's.



This is sort of like erecting a statue of Hitler at the gates of the Holocaust Museum. In my dreams, that sculpture is standing at the gates of hell, a totem of the machine mind of Moloch. Taos, as an art retreat, was founded by people fleeing the phoniness and propaganda of Manhattan, of the machine mind, and the last thing we want here is a Manhattan totem. Couse, Berninghaus, Blumenschein, Fechin, and all the rest would see Barrett's sculpture as the sign it was meant to be: a bold flag of conquering by the avant garde, a demoralizing reminder that there is no place left to hide. Hickey said it himself while he was here this summer: Taos is a refuge of "provincials" and "incredibly stupid" realists, and we need to be wiped out like the natives before us. We need our town museum and newspaper to be stolen with great piles of big-city money. We need to be forcibly brought into the 21st century, sort of like the natives camping about the Washita river in 1868 were brought into the 19th century. Of course this wiping out will be done by the market, making it humanitarian and almost invisible, but the result is the same. We will be extinct.

Modernism thought it had achieved this extinction of realism in the 60's, but pockets of resistance held on in places such as Taos, and in the late 90's this resistance began to grow, even infiltrating New York City itself. Which is why we see a renewed effort to keep us quietly underground. It is no accident that Taos was chosen for the current campaign. The avant garde is a master of only one thing: PR. It knows



where to send its battalions, it knows where to spend its money. No resistance will be tolerated, no retreats will be overlooked. Every cave will be bombed and strafed, every thatch hut will be napalmed and burned to the ground in the name of progress.

After I spoke out about Hopper and Hickey and the Harwood, the *Taos News* made it clear that they were not interested in profiling me in any way, although I had bought ads. Just like everywhere else, the media here is controlled by the Chamber of Commerce, and the CoC has decided to put its money behind Modernism. This despite the fact that most of the tourists are here to see realist paintings (supposing they are here to see art at all). The monied interests of the avant garde have convinced the locals that the future belongs to Manhattan totems and heavily promoted shows for Hollywood types and 200-page catalogs written by darlings of academia. I doubt the fact that their "Summer of Love" and Hopper shows were a complete bust will disabuse them of this notion. The small towns of the world are no longer satisfied being small or being retro or being quaint or being counter-culture. Taos realism really was a sort of counterculture, since culture is dominated by Modernism. But the invading phonies have turned that logic on its head, convincing the local powers that Modernism is still counterculture and that realism is regressive. Modernism hasn't been "counter" for a century, but what are facts when money is involved? The facts have been inverted once again by salesmen, but the small-town businessmen cannot see the inversion.

There is no real appreciation of counterculture anymore: no protection for it and no mandate for its continuance. Multiculturalism is sold to us as counterculture, but multiculturalism, as it truly exists in the real world, is just a quick dilution of the past into the present, a dressing of crass commerce in a thousand costumes. It is the allowance of a thousand different shallow facades over the same social emptiness. You can bring the robes of Africa into the mall, but do not bring any real African ideas. You can bring the colorful dragon from China, but do not let it roar. You can import the poses of Swatmarama to help us stretch out in the morning, but do not import Lord Shiva with him. We can use the frippery of other cultures to sell soda pop and sneakers, but we do not want the philosophy beneath the dry goods.

The crass "Summer of Love" here in Taos is the perfect example: a sales pitch to appeal to tourists and increase revenues. But Taos leaders did nothing but harass hippies in the 60's and 70's, and they still don't want non-rich whites here, busking or creating any sort of real counterculture. Like Santa Fe, they want the center of town clean and gentrified, as much like Soho as possible. They would rather have empty shopfronts than have the shops filled with real artisans. They are hostile to bicyclists, widening the streets only for ever more and ever larger cars. Just as the Bureau of Land Management and the Forest Service continue to harass the Rainbow Gatherings (which were here in Northern New Mexico this summer), the various "arts" towns of the US continue to marginalize and excise any real counterculture, in the name of cleanliness and order. They don't want a counterculture or a multiculture, they want a fake and shallow "rainbow" of people of various skintones all spending money at the same pre-fab places.

Every conglomeration of more than a hundred people, no matter their color or heritage, now aspires to be a smaller, more exclusive version of Manhattan, with a string of malls and franchises and a write-up in *The New Yorker*. Santa Fe fell to this mindset 20 years ago, and SITE Santa Fe was the final death knell of anything real in the capitol. Taos wants to be a smaller version of Santa Fe, which is now a smaller version of Austin or Seattle or Denver, which are smaller versions of Los Angeles or New York City. The counterculture in Austin or Santa Fe now consists of hanging out at Whole Foods or getting tattoos. In other words, the counterculture is now defined by drinking four-dollar organic coffee sold to you by a “progressive” who busts unions and quotes Ayn Rand, Milton Friedman, and Ludwig von Mises. Yoga is the only thing that differentiates these people from Republicans.

What does this have to do with the first part of my paper, you ask? Well, one reason we have arrived at this cultural abyss is that the meek realists were always too modest to answer the rising fools of the avant garde. The 20th century was a one-way battle, fought unilaterally by fakes and phonies dressed up as progressives. Here in Taos, the realists *still* won't answer. They still have nothing to say, even as Hickey and Hopper waltz into the town museum and take over the town paper, calling them morons to their face. If there were any real progressives here, they might be expected to point out that Hopper is a Republican, in favor of the various wars and Patriot Acts and Military Tribunals and Departments of Homeland Security. If there were any real artists here, they might be expected to point out that Hopper can't paint or sculpt to save his life. They might be expected to point out that Hickey is a self-appointed expert with no artistic credentials. Owning a gallery is not an artistic credential, since anyone can own a gallery. Owning a gallery is not a talent or an achievement. But the silence is its own sonic boom.

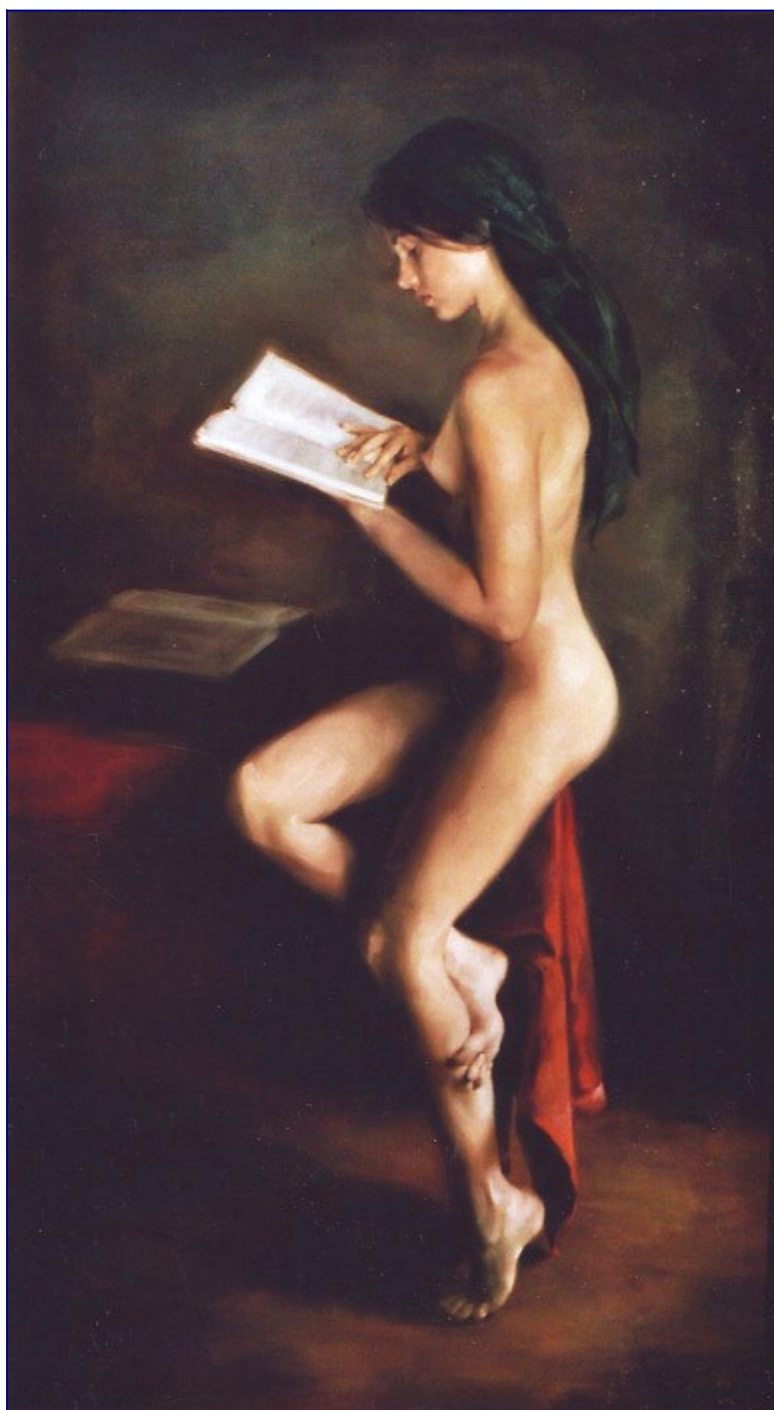
The whole town looks at me sideways, as some sort of denier of everyone's right to be an artist. If I will attack Hopper, I might attack them next. The entire art world looks at me sideways, as a closet fascist, because I will not grant respect to every worst fool and his most foolish creation. I want the hierarchy back, I want quality back, and I want standards back, and whether I want them back for good or bad reasons is not the question. I am a danger to every fool, and the majority is now a fool, and knows it. For these, I am no liberator, I am the unwelcome judgment. Hickey can ask for value judgments, to pad out his airy articles, but he cannot really desire them. A logical ranking, by any real standards, would put Hickey below the worst high-school painter. A reinstated Renaissance-style ranking would purge the avant garde of all its artists and writers. Not one soul would be left. The great deluge did not create such a depopulation as this ranking would.

But we have seen nothing like this, and won't. The sensible and meek people of the 20th century preferred not to answer the fools, and those fools have now codified the wisdom of their conceit. They have entrenched themselves in all the seats of power, in art and out of it. They have quite literally taken over the world. They have multiplied. They have begetted and begetted. In art they have buried the sensible people under a mile-high pile of shoddy and crumbling artifacts, tarding up every street corner and blackening every monument and vulgarizing every square and prostituting every plaza and profaning every holy place. And still the meek will not speak. The 21st century is even quieter than the 20th. They cannot find tongue to reply to the toothed Leviathan, since he is a Biblical monster too big

to take on. Leave him to the Lord. They can only find the courage to write to me, complaining of my ego in holding Leviathan at the point of my single sword.



# *Nude Reading*



*oil*

*60 x 34 in.*

# NEW REALISM

*by Miles Mathis*



*by Bo Bartlett*

Realism, Traditionalism, Classicism, Naturalism, Contemporary Realism, New Realism, Old Master Realism, Classical Realism—whatever you choose to call it, real painting is making a comeback. Artists all over the world are returning in ever greater numbers to painting subject pictures. They are using many different methods but all are joined by a common goal—painting visual representations of the visual world. They are also joined by an interest in technique as a means to this representation. That

is, they recognize the importance of learning a skill, a method, and becoming masters of their media. No longer is the idea the thing. No, the artifact is the thing. It is the outcome that is important, not just the concept. Many of these artists have apprenticed themselves for years in one way or another—either to a chosen master or to some other structured program of study. Many paint from life; some make their own canvases; a few, their own paints.

In some places, this tradition never wholly died out—in China and Russia, for instance. Even in the US the tradition held on feebly in a couple of small pockets through the worst times in the middle of the 20th century. But it was in the US and Western Europe that the tradition came closest to dying out altogether. This is especially tragic in Europe, which was the birthplace and pinnacle of realist art. Except for a few American schools, Western Europe is the last to join the counter-modern trend, having embraced the avant garde even more fully than the US ever has (especially in society at large).

But despite the dilatoriness of Europe and the continued foot-dragging in the US, the numbers in realism continue to increase apace. Attendance at private schools is booming, many organizations have been founded and have attracted large memberships, and sales are increasing. A few galleries have switched from modernism to realism, even in the heart of New York City. All this is very good news, although it is only the beginning. Very much is left to be done. The avant garde is still very strong and strongly opposed to realism. Almost all the major institutions throughout the world are dominated by the avant garde, including governmental bodies, universities, foundations, trusts, and museums. The upper end of the market is also controlled by the avant garde through the use of the media—magazines, critics, books—which act as advertising for the largest galleries.

After that fairly upbeat introduction, I have to admit that I have glossed the current state of realism mainly as a lead-in to a critique of it. For while I am part of realism—simply by definition—I do not feel fully allied to it. One would think that a realist must benefit from an upswing in realism, but I have not found it to be so. The rebirth of realism is so young that its growth is still mostly chaotic. And of course an explosion of interest in realism by artists is not the same as an explosion of educated clients (or artists). The number of buyers is quite small and the number of buyers with taste would appear to be minimal.

Many will find an artist critiquing his own field to be somewhat strange. It will be assumed to be bad PR if nothing worse. However, I find myself in a peculiar situation, a situation in which standard business practices and even standards of communication are not of much use. I have come to the conclusion that speaking my mind is the best thing I can do. The first reason is that I have absolutely nothing to lose by doing so. Playing the game by the rules has gotten me nowhere. Everyone would like to think that all an artist has to do is paint: the rest will take care of itself. Quality is its own advertisement. Unfortunately, this viewpoint is naïve. I am now fifteen years into my career and I do not find that viewers are now any more likely to look at my work like I believe it should be looked at (or to look at *any* art work the way it should be looked at). It has finally occurred to me that the best policy is to simply tell them, to give them the clue they have been seeking. If this ends up further alienating me, then at least I will be on record for future generations—generations who may be more receptive. In all my readings of history, I have always been most disappointed when the neglected artists did not at least tell the world what they thought of it. They mostly denied themselves this

satisfaction. Some of the greatest critical writing has come from neglected artists—the few who had the courage to say what they really thought. The Thoreaus and Nietzsches and Whistlers and van Goghs. They did themselves no great favor in the short term, but in the long term they have done quite well. They were long-sighted, understanding that art is long and that the market is a fickle temptress, almost always wrong.

Dan Gerhartz, a well-known realist, asked me about ten years ago what I was trying to do. The question shocked me at the time. It seemed so obvious. I didn't give him an answer because the situation appeared hopeless: if you have to explain a painting then all is lost. Besides, I knew that his question was one of technique and I didn't want to talk about technique. I knew that his question meant that there was something about my technique he didn't like, and he was trying to find a nice way of giving me some advice. I could see that he and I could have nothing to say to each other: I was looking at his paintings as paintings and he was looking at my paintings as paint. That I was correct in this was confirmed to me over the next decade, as Dan continued to experiment and obsess with technique, adding ever more color and playing with effects, as I continued to downplay my technique in search of subtle mood.

I have found this divergence to be informative, since in my opinion he and I had started out very much the same. Our early paintings are alike in many ways—not just in technique. We had galleries nearby in Santa Fe in the early 90's and many people commented on our similarity—our beautiful brooding girls and Sargentian paint. He was always more interested in technique for its own sake than I was, and his early paintings are more advanced in some ways than mine. He came out of the art schools in Chicago, and had some influence from Richard Schmid, which explains his keen interest in design and technique. I liked Dan's early works a lot, basically for the same reason I liked my own: I liked the models he chose and the expressions he gave them. They were sad beauties, and he was capturing their sadness well. He had an edge, and his technique was still restrained enough to express this edge. But it was an honest edge. He was not trying to have an edge, to be "edgy". It was not preconceived, or brutal in any way. He was simply capturing an emotion (whether the model's or his own does not really matter) and doing so in a mostly unconscious—and therefore artistic—way.

Or at least this was my reading of his paintings. I now think that I was one of the very few who saw this. Most of those I talked to only saw the pretty paint. I am not even sure that Dan ever saw it. He was so unconscious of it that perhaps he does not know it even now. At any rate he followed the pretty paint and not the emotion. In the next few years his technique became more and more beautiful in itself. His paint became gorgeous. He even surpassed his master Schmid in this. Around the time he won the people's choice award at NAWA, and caused a scandal, his technique peaked. His painting *Coffee* was so beautiful that with hindsight there is little doubt it should have won Best of Show. But for me he had already lost the edge. His eye had wandered from the eye of the model—and what she was thinking and feeling, and what he desired—to the background and the dress and the raking light. The compositions now were always cluttered with beautiful paintable objects—reeds and flowers and apples and eggs and whatnot. The beautiful girl was becoming just another of these objects. She was only one of the things you looked at in admiring the paint.

Perhaps this was a function of his happy marriage and the requirement that his subject matter "mature" to fit it. I don't know. But I found it nothing sort of tragic, to be honest. I wanted to see Dan



painting nudes, painting real subjects, painting his lovers, painting his obsessions. Seeking the edge always. Not the edge between tone and tone, but the edge of his surety.



Possibly Dan felt this a bit himself, for soon he was pursuing the subjects of Christianity. He was trying valiantly to transcend technique, to transcend art for the sake of paint. Christianity may still be a viable

subject, but in my opinion none of Dan's Christian canvases approach the real emotion of his early work. There is a forced emotionalism in the Christian work, a lack of true depth. There is no excitement of the unknown, the mysterious meeting with the other, the heightened nerves and emotional ambiguity that I found in his early work. Only the desperate attempt to make an historical subject live up to its own press. Even his most successful and ambitious works in this line are flawed in very basic ways, ways that have nothing to do with technique. *Hind's Feet*, for instance, is beautiful in many ways. The figures are worked into the background flawlessly. The color scheme is harmonious and the composition is well-balanced. The models might have been better chosen, especially the angels, who look a bit vapid, but all in all there is little to complain about as a matter of composition or paint handling (the paint is not as beautiful as it was ten years ago, but it is still better than most). No, the problem is in choosing a subject from *The Pilgrim's Progress*. John Bunyan's popular allegory simply does not lend itself to high art. The best that can be done with it is illustration, and Gerhartz's painting can only be judged in these terms. It is a very large, very nice illustration of a rather silly, simplistic story. *The Pilgrim's Progress* is a dumbed-down Christianity for people not capable of Biblical subtleties and ambiguities. In my opinion, a Christian artist would be best advised to take subjects from the Bible itself, since he is already competing directly with the greatest artists in history—none of whom limited themselves by tying their canvases to inferior texts.

I have allowed myself this long digression on Dan Gerhartz because I find it the most useful thing in getting my specific point across. I have thought long and hard about Dan, since I have seen him from the beginning as one of my alter-egos, one of my time twins. Who better to learn from than a time twin? If I have diverged from Dan, it was by no accident. It has always been a conscious choice to keep to my path, even as Dan got famous for leaving it behind. Nor is Dan my only example in this. We all define ourselves both by alliance and opposition, and I have kept close watch on my fellow time travelers, to see what I might learn, positively and negatively.

Unfortunately, most of what I have learned has been of the negative sort. In studying my peers, I have discovered mainly what not to do. The appealing positive lessons have come from people long dead. This is no surprise, and no special mark against the living realists, seeing that we are all struggling to find a subject. But it does suggest to me that we would all be of better service to each other if we criticized a bit more broadly and deeply. I have mentioned in other papers that the pre-20th century artists were much more outspoken and opinionated. Compared to us, they lived in a chaos of disagreement and invective. The discussion on art was wide-ranging and ubiquitous. The cafes were full of it, as were the papers. Not just backslapping and giving each other awards, but animated dialogue on serious subjects. These artists did not talk only or mainly about technique. They talked about the paintings and what they expressed and should express.

This is how we differ from them. We are all politeness and manner. We are still under the thumbs of our kindergarten teachers: "if you can't say anything nice don't say anything at all." When we do critique it is only about technique. The New Realists are obsessed with technique, and they rarely criticize each other on anything else. This is true for two reasons: 1) an attack on subject matter is seen to be a personal attack, 2) the New Realist paintings are mostly about technique to start with. There is nothing to talk about except the technique. Dan Gerhartz is rare for offering up a painting that has a subject, and I am even rarer for criticizing him on it. Most don't know the story he is illustrating, and

those that do would never think of criticizing the subject as a subject. It is simply not important enough to comment on. Contrary to this, I take Dan seriously enough to find his subject matter important, and I take art seriously enough to comment on Dan's place in it. This makes my critique a sign of caring, not the reverse.

Dan differs from most realists in that he has at least tried to find meaningful subject matter. Most realists seem satisfied with studies or with clever compositional novelties. Claudio Bravo is one of these. He is one of the great living technical masters, and yet I have never seen a single painting of his that I could admire. I look and think, yes, he has brilliantly painted that, but why? Why spend such a huge amount of time and energy painting a vase or a paper bag or a man with a blank look? Why choose to paint the world and then empty it of all emotion? It would be more efficient to just paint a black canvas, like the moderns. In addition, Bravo doesn't veer from photographic realism enough to merit much artistic interest. That is to say, his paintings are so real that there is no room to slip in any expression. The photograph and the painting have exactly the same content. Bravo has not added anything by not using a camera. Furthermore, his subjects have no interest of their own. His people are as bland as his gourds. Often they are only props for hooded capes. One of his most ambitious pieces, *Tentación de San Antonio*, proves this beyond a doubt. The six-figure composition is a fake arrangement, and this is its entire purpose. He has set up a faux-Christian motif and then consciously undercut it by including a prop-man (with headphones) and a lamb that has messed the floor. Was this worth the effort of the painting? Not for me. It is not that it is sacrilegious, it is that it is silly and bland. Bravo has chosen to paint it simply because he can't find anything meaningful to paint. Too bad.



Dino Valls is another who can't find a meaningful subject, instead choosing to deal in surrealistic ironies and paradoxes. His technique is often amazing, but it is in the service of absolutely nothing. In a recent polyptych called *Barathrum* he suspends and prods a number of beautiful expressionless nude bodies, separating them into six mostly arbitrary panels. The details are often exquisite, but the work as a whole is depressing for its spiritual emptiness. Again, I am not critiquing Valls for his anti-Christian content or anatomical or medical bluntness: I am critiquing him not for his content but for his lack of content. The paintings are not really about anything beyond clever combination and mildly shocking juxtaposition. The emotional content is zero. In another recent work, *Calami*, Valls has painted a beautiful female child with pen nibs stuck into her cheek. This is a manufactured mystery that completely fails to resonate. Why does she have nibs stuck to her face? Who cares! The painting would have been much more powerful without the nibs and without the adult's hand on her head. If Valls is making some statement about modern sociopolitics, it is one I am not even interested enough to pursue. I am not interested in manufactured psychological or sociopolitical lessons, especially those revealed by surrealism. I find this categorically shallow, like the faux paradoxes of Escher. High art is not about games and puzzles, or about unwrapping faux paradoxes. It may be about psychology, in a way, but it should be a psychology of emotions, directly revealed, not about surrealistic puzzles. These puzzles have a place, and are sometimes interesting as article illustrations or the like. But \$100,000 paintings

should hit higher levels of emotional discourse and subtlety. Art history should have learned this from Dali's example, but the lesson is still undigested. I would suggest that Valls has some wonderful models he is mostly wasting. The nude children he has access to could be used to subtle effect, an effect that would be unique in this day and age. Unfortunately he always has to play some painterly game on their bodies, nullifying any effect they might have if painted directly and honestly.



Odd Nerdrum is the prince of this game. He does not chop bodies up or meld them into multiples like Valls, but he does use them for a hyper-conscious effect of his own. Nerdrum has created a one-dimensional pseudo-world of one-armed hermaphrodites and gun-toting onanists who prefer to flex their feet and stare at the sky, like acid freaks. Why? Nobody knows. Admittedly he is a master of weird cloud formations and bleak landscapes. His paint quality is highly interesting and his models are sometimes well-chosen for his effect. Nerdrum is also very ambitious: he has created a lot of big works. But what is it all in the service of? Absolutely nothing. It is all masturbation and Nerdrum knows it. Why else should he go to such pains to show us his own erection? It is the unsubtlest hint of all. He says, "Here I am, the great string puller, the man behind the curtain in an even phonier Oz. And I revel in it. Create a more meaningful universe and I will jack you off, too. Until then I am untouchable—except to myself."





In a completely different vein is Nelson Shanks. Shanks is in the same general price range as Nerdrum, but has a vastly different clientele. His appeal is equally mysterious to me. His most famous painting is a portrait of Princess Diana. The royals are famous for their miscalculations in portraits, and this is another of them. Diana looks as if the taxidermist just got through with her. Over her stuffed form a frilly blouse overwhelms a short haircut and vapid face, and the hair itself looks more like a helmet than a coif. The background is flat and empty, and, worse, almost precisely the color of her skin. It is hard to tell if she is leaning into the wall, is drugged, or is propped up by a stick.

Not all of Shanks portraits are failures, not by a long shot. His portrait of the Pope is about as good as such a thing can be in this day and age. It is quite easy to see how Shanks became the top portraitist in the UK, especially if one browses the books of the portrait brokers. He deserves to be at the top of his field right now. He works hard, demands sittings, forces sitters to at least try to be interesting, and seems to enjoy the milieu he has chosen. His likenesses are usually perfect and he gives the client what he wants: lots of detail and sparkle. He does not have Ronald Sherr's graceful brushwork or Sherr's gift for subtlety, but he truly is better than just about anyone else in the field of portraiture in the world. Furthermore, Shanks is an energetic businessman, a serious scholar of his field, and a dedicated craftsman. Despite all this, though, he is being vastly oversold outside of portraiture. Without a paying sitter, he is mostly lost creatively. He tries to make up for a lack of insight and subtlety with color and clutter.



One of his most widely-published works is *Sophia, an Anthology*. This is a full-length nude of a slouching, bandy-legged young woman surrounded by bric-a-brac. In some ways, it is technically quite advanced—like all of Shank's works. He likes a lot of finish, a lot of detail, and a lot of color, and he delivers them all in spades. But the overall effect here is far from pleasing to the eye. There is simply too much color. It fails to harmonize. Beyond this, the model's rather attractive face is yet cold and aloof—her stare is off-putting. She appears to be trying to maintain her self-assurance in the circumstance by feigning pride, but this contradicts her pose, which is neither comely nor haughty. The effect is a mélange of mixed signals that is not even interesting as ambiguity.

Even worse is *Grace*, an older model with a figure to be proud of but an attitude that is nothing short of obnoxious. She appears to be trying very hard to maintain a pose of high emotion, one perhaps suggested to her by Shanks. But she comes off as a smug over-the-hill actress manqué. Shanks has rendered her skin with a realism that has become scary: it is so shiny it begins to resemble the plastic skin of a Duane Hanson sculpture. Shanks brags about using 24 colors in one patch of skin, but this is precisely the problem. Real skin under real conditions just doesn't look like that; nor should it. Shanks' skin looks like an over-saturated face on TV or in the magazines, where the editors and producers have boosted all the colors in order give everyone a Disney glow. I am not suggesting that Shanks uses photos, but photo film also does this. Almost all modern brands provide a color boost in the full range, so that the uneducated eye can revel in the Technicolor fun. Only certain brands of professional film

still provide a “natural” palette of colors, and these films are not best sellers. As in film, so in painting, it would appear.

Such is also the case with Shanks’ portrait of Mary McFadden. Every inch is saturated to the nth degree. Everybody appears to be trying a bit too hard. Ms. McFadden is trying very hard to be provocative, in all the meanings of the word, and Shanks is using every trick at his disposal to help her to do so. Unfortunately they both come off as garish and gauche—as the sort of toxic people you would avoid at a dinner party.

As far as obnoxious portraits go, the portrait of Ed Notebaert would be hard to surpass. I don’t think it would be possible to affect a more malignant pose, and such levels of impudence and malice could only be achieved by the joint efforts of sitter and painter. It is hard to tell if Mr. Notebaert is aiming for “Mafia Don” or “Wrestling Promoter.”

Shanks finally crosses the line from distasteful to comic with *Catalina*, a white horse romping under an orange sky. I can almost hear Thomas Kinkaid gritting his teeth that he did not get there first.

Shanks desperately wants to appear cultivated and sophisticated. He is an unregenerate name-dropper (as can be seen by reading the articles on his website). Unfortunately the names he drops are a giveaway to his true level. Ronald Reagan, not a man known for sophistication; Les Wexner (whom Shanks is now suing for non-payment); and Madonna, with whom he sought unsuccessfully to do “some big stripper thing.”

Despite all this, Shanks has become one of the most revered realists of his time. Many people have accepted his own horn tooting, or have been cowed by his resume. The portrait societies have fawned over him, the magazines have finally discovered him, and students are flocking to him. Many of the young realists aspire to his garish color schemes and anal brushwork. All of this has been enabled by a complete lack of discussion and criticism. Maybe contemporary painters in realism are afraid of a libel suit for expressing an opinion, or maybe they really have no opinion except the one they get from above, from the burgeoning realist establishment. The levels of toadyism today are truly incredible. What we seem to have, in most cases, is little careerists—people looking for a foothold in the market at whatever cost. These people know that serious discussion is dangerous and unnecessary. What is most needful is efficient boot-licking.

We see this not only in regard to Shanks, but in regard to every other successful realist. We see the idolizing of the older, established artist, whether it is Leffel or Schmid or Daniel Greene or Burt Silverman or Bruno Lucchesi, or any of the rest. These artists are so spoiled by the accolades that they begin to believe them. They become blind to their own faults and their followers inherit this blindness. It thereby becomes self-perpetuating. They spend all day every day critiquing younger artists works and making pronouncements, but they never benefit from a critique themselves. Most younger artists are too timid to discuss them even in private. Can you imagine Courbet afraid to discuss Ingres or Delacroix, or Whistler afraid to discuss the Academicians, or Caravaggio afraid to discuss anyone at all?

All this false politeness is finally unhealthy. It will end up solidifying into a new Royal Academy of timid careerists, society portraitists and photo-copiers. Without a lively discussion the chaff will never separate from the wheat, and we will quickly become as entrenched as the avant garde.

Art critics have ignored realism for most of the twentieth century. You do not see critiques or



reviews in the newspapers or magazines (except maybe of Rockwell recently, or of Wyeth when the Helga series came out). This has allowed the upper echelon of realism to exist in a bubble. The older artists, the ones who reached the top of the field in the last 20 years, probably haven't suffered serious analysis from anyone but themselves since they were in school. A certain small segment of society was so desperate for realism that it kissed the hem of anyone with a shred of talent. These artists, most of whom are in their sixties or seventies now, were almost immediately enshrined, and they have become like little dictators. They are the workshop and society darlings, and they can do no wrong. If they fought with each other, something might get said and there would be a possibility of progress. But for the most part they are all politeness and marketable good cheer. They are too old to squabble: it is best just to ride the wave.

I am not suggesting that we take seriously anything the avant garde critics have to say on the matter, but the lack of a serious conversation is detrimental to our field. It has become claustrophobic. If the older artists will not say anything interesting, then I guess it is up to the middle-age second tier to speak up.

I have been scouring the media and markets for years in search of some intelligent dialogue on art, finally concluding that there simply is none. The avant garde artists have kept quiet for years, since their silence is part of the division of labor. This leaves art criticism in that wing wholly to non-artist critics—people who frankly haven't got a clue about anything. But within realism the situation is just as bad, though for different reasons. For decades the conversation has been kept up only by magazines like *American Artist* and the *Artist's Magazine*—technical journals for Sunday painters and beginners. Realism has never had an analogue to *ARTnews* or *Art in America*—the mouthpieces for the avant garde. *American Art Review* is one of the go-to mags now for advertising, but their editorial content is non-contemporary. They write about Cecilia Beaux, not Odd Nerdrum or Nelson Shanks. *Southwest Art* is the closest thing to realist promotion, but it is very limited in its editorial breadth or depth. Its features are geared to sell ads, not to seriously discuss anything. A real opinion piece would be out of place there. None of the new small realist journals, many of which are online, want to ask the hard questions or do the hard work. They don't want to offend anyone; they want to build markets; they want to make money; they want to socialize; they want to test their PR. The list-serves are likewise timid. Most are deathly afraid of flamewars. They forget that art history has been one long flamewar. And, unfortunately, wherever opinion erupts it devolves into childish name-calling and threats of lawsuits or crapflooding. No one seems able to hold up his end with cogent argument. The polemicists have become like the gun-toting gang members who are too sissified to mix it up with their fists. They shoot from a moving car and save themselves even the face recognition.

The closest we have come to a serious discussion was provided by Nerdrum in *ARTnews* in an 8-page paid ad in 1999 and a 5-page followup in 2000 (*ARTnews* is not about to devote editorial space to a critique of the avant garde). But his argument was such a shot into his own foot that *ARTnews* found it quite easy to forgive him for it, and to even have him on their cover a couple of years later. They realized that he was deviant and confused enough to be one of their own, and since making the cover he has not needed to pay for editorial space. The monthly full-page *Forum* ads have been more than enough in that regard.

Nerdrum leveled certain justified accusations against the avant garde and its philosophy, but the central point of the article was to give the avant garde the title “art” and to keep for himself the title “kitsch.” For some reason this seemed to him to be a spark of genius, on the level of making lemonade from lemons. But the argument only set everyone’s teeth on edge and it has mostly been forgotten. Nerdrum brought Kant into the discussion to give it ballast, claiming that Kant was a pietist and an anti-sensualist. While this is true in the context that Nerdrum intended, it is not really to the point. Kant’s influence on art was minimal at best. One only need look at the timeline. Plenty of sensualists postdated Kant. Delacroix, for example, could ignore Kant with impunity, as could Rodin another half-century later. The tide did not turn until after Rodin, and it turned for mostly non-Kantian reasons.

The most mysterious thing about Nerdrum’s argument is his claim that Kitsch is about the “smiling open face,” the gypsy girl, the couple on the beach, the moose on the edge of the wood. These subjects can be kitschy (or not), but the problem is that Nerdrum doesn’t paint any of these things. He creates a dichotomy, implying that he naturally falls into the Kitsch camp. But he doesn’t. His subject matter and treatment put him far closer to the avant garde camp. That is why he has finally gained acceptance by them. The only thing kitschy about Nerdrum is his realism, which was kitschy only by the fiat of Modernism—a fiat that has been rescinded. Lucian Freud has convinced the avant garde that realism, of a sort, can be cool. And so they have let John Currin and Jenny Saville into the game as well. That is the door that Nerdrum entered through. For him to pretend that he is the ally of the gypsy painter and the moose painter is absurd. He has done everything possible to distance himself from sensualism of that sort. There is absolutely no warmth in Nerdrum’s work. He has purposely painted extreme alienation. He seems to think that because his strange people defecate in full view and have erections they are sensualists. The truth is his canvases have almost no kitsch appeal—that is to say mass appeal or popular appeal. Realism is not a guarantee of kitsch status. I am not holding this against him. I have no great fondness for kitsch. I am just pointing out that his claim to the term is dubious.

In my opinion Nerdrum paints avant garde realism, a realism that is tied to current sociopolitics. Nerdrum is not old-fashioned, kitschy, or a sensualist. Delacroix and Rodin were sensualists. A viewer wants to have sex with Rodin’s *Danaide* or *Andromeda*. Nerdrum’s freaks only make a viewer want to start recycling or using birth control to avoid the Mad Max future he has shown us. Thomas Kinkaid is kitsch, Pino is kitsch, Nerdrum is not kitsch.

In all this barrage of multiple tropes, people seem to have forgotten what kitsch is. Kitsch originally referred to low quality art produced for a popular market. It included mass-produced art replicas—like 6-inch plastic Davids and Pietas—as well as other cheap decorative pieces for the mantel or the bookshelf or the refrigerator magnet. I think it has been fair to extend the definition as a term of abuse toward expensive art that is also of low quality and that appeals strictly to the lowest, most vulgar levels of the popular market. However, we must make several distinctions. 1) Not everything that is popular is kitsch. Some things of high quality are nonetheless popular and are not kitsch. Examples are Beethoven, Michelangelo and Jane Austen. Almost everyone likes the *David*—this does not make it kitsch. 2) Not all mass-marketed things are kitsch. Films and music and books are mass-marketed, but not all are of low-quality. 3) A thing does not have to be “high art” to avoid being kitsch. Meaning, it does not have to be serious, elevated, sublime, or deep. It simply has to be well made. An example

would be the TV show *Friends*, which most people would probably cite as a prime example of kitsch. Despite being popular, mass marketed, and certainly not high art, *Friends* avoids being kitsch by being well made. The same might be said of *Frasier* or *Cheers*. These shows are all well-acted, well-written, and well-produced. Kitsch is of “low quality”—we do not have a match. 4) Kitsch is determined by treatment, not by subject. No subject is categorically a kitschy subject. Paintings of ballerinas are generally considered kitschy, but Degas is not kitsch. Paintings of animals are generally considered kitschy, but Landseer is not kitsch. Beggar children are generally considered kitschy, but Murillo is not kitsch. Gypsy girls are considered to be kitsch, but Sargent and Bouguereau are not kitsch. Mothers with children are considered kitschy, but Leonardo and Raphael are not kitsch. They are not kitsch because they are not of low quality. All are painted with skill and genuine emotion.

Thomas Kinkaid is the current master of kitsch. His work is kitsch because it is poorly painted and poorly conceived, and because marketing is its sole *raison d’etre*. Lighthouses and cottages can be painted in a non-kitschy way (see the Wyeths) but unfortunately Kinkaid has not discovered this. Technically, Kinkaid is quite simply the worst famous artist in history. Beyond technique, a lot of it has to do with intent. Kinkaid’s intention is to appeal to people with bad taste, since he knows that these people far outnumber anyone else. Every “artistic” decision he makes is therefore informed solely by sales. Recently a couple of artists hired a polling company to discover what the masses really wanted. It was discovered that what they most wanted was bright colors in cheery landscapes. Kinkaid had discovered this by his own methods long before. To a real artist, Kinkaid is completely transparent. His work is disingenuous from top to bottom. Even before one enters his gallery and gets the Christian hardsell (“did you know Thomas Kinkaid is a Christian and that he loves his wife?” asks the greeter at the door of the mall-shop) or before one sees the highlighters doing their PR presentations, it is clear that every glob of paint was squeezed from the tube of greed.

A step up from Kinkaid is Pino. Pino has *a lot* more skill than Kinkaid, but he does not merit the *Friends* exception. Pino does not get a pass because despite his skill, the paintings are not well made. Only the brushwork and drawing are good (the drawing is accurate enough, but completely inexpressive). The composition, color harmonies, and concepts are very poor. What we have are a few mannequins in aprons surrounded by flowers. The poses are always wooden, the faces empty, the eyes dead, the emotional content zero. Pino has created a highly colored landscape out of his figures, a cheery expressionless little glimpse into a sugary nowhere. Pino is a promotional phenomenon and nothing more, proof that enough market research and advertising can buy fame.



Kitsch is not only to be found in mall shops and realist galleries. Kitsch and the avant garde are not mutually exclusive. Ever since Andy Warhol did so, the avant garde has embraced kitsch. What were Warhol's Marilyns except a cooption of kitsch into the highest brackets of expensive art? The same could be said of Lichtenstein's cartoons. These works had a supposed theoretical side, too, it is true, which the critics used to make commentary *on* kitsch; but as artifacts they were just kitsch out of context. That is, these works were bad on purpose, but the artist wanted to deny his audience the usual vulgar pleasure. He did this by putting them in an intellectual context. The viewer was addressed as an intellectual, undercutting his ability to enjoy the works on a vulgar level, and causing unease.

These examples suggest another thing: not all bad art is kitsch. The avant garde is always of low quality, usually on purpose, but only some of it is kitsch. Most modern works are in no danger of developing a popular audience. There is no chance that a majority will ever like them for artistic reasons. They aren't kitsch, they are just awful. A large proportion aren't even art, by any meaningful definition. Found objects and other minimally manipulated objects are not art, and neither are concepts or ideas that do not really jell into artifacts. Samplings are most often not art, and most photographs are not art.

At about the same time that Nerdrum was making his case in *ARTnews*, a group of realist painters and neo-classical musicians started a movement called the "Derriere Guard." It has already faded and has recently been replaced by a newer movement, "Slow Art." The two groups are similar in intent, and are both earnest and mostly correct in their main assertions. The problem is that neither group seems to understand anything about public relations or the power of the word. This is especially strange in the case of Derriere Guard, which included the writer Tom Wolfe. It seems that Wolfe might have clued them into the malaprop connotations of "derriere guard." Not only does the term imply reaction, backsliding, and regression, but it also implies incompetence and timidity. Those bringing up the rear are the dummies and the cowards, protected by the line in front of them. Beyond this, the term also

makes one think of the other English translation of *derriere*. The movement is therefore the butt-guard of art. The butt of everyone's jokes. It does not matter that *derriere* guard has other more positive connotations. *All* the potential connotations must be taken into consideration when predicting PR.

You can immediately see that "Slow Art" also suffers from most of these problems. "Slow Artists" are a bit thick in the head. Like Special Olympians, they have to try a bit harder. As with naming a child, you should see these things coming and do your best to avoid them. "Slow Art" comes from the writing of Robert Hughes, I believe, where in context it does not seem so risible. But when used as a guild title it can only fail to inspire.

Both groups appear to suffer from over-confidence. Like Nerdrum, they think they can make lemonade from lemons. They don't have to ponder what name to take, since they can turn any name to gold.

The UK's analogue to *Derriere Guard* is *Stuckism*. The Stuckists take their name from a quote of Saatchi darling Tracey Emin, in which she accused the realists of being "stuck, stuck, stuck." Already you can see that the Stuckists have made the same error as Nerdrum: they have allowed themselves to be defined by the enemy. Nerdrum embraced the epithet "kitsch" and the Stuckists have accepted "stuck." Like Nerdrum, they see this as a brilliant response. It is not. It is a fatal error. The adjective "stuck" has negative connotations, and these connotations cannot be turned even if allied to the greatest art in history. Michelangelo himself could not re-define the word. He could only make it appear very very inappropriate, and thereby possibly amusing.

But the Stuckists are not Michelangelos. Very far from it. Although most of their complaints against the avant garde are correct and reasonable and most of their goals are earnest and useful—and might be in the service of art—it is unfortunately the case that the work of the Stuckists doesn't much support their goals or complaints. Their artistic abilities are little better than the avant garde, and their politics veers into the same sort of working class rot that taints Emin's work. Not that I am against the working class in any way. I am certainly not for any return to the conditions of 19th century England, where the workers were exploited and the aristocracy complacent. But art is not mainly about working class politics, or *any* politics. Art should be a classless enterprise, one that reveals personal moods, emotions, desires, and ideas, not group warfare.

The Stuckists agree explicitly with me on this, I know, but they still manage to ally themselves to anti-art tendencies by arguing against the necessity of technique and by campaigning against "elitism". They don't seem to realize that any useful enterprise is elitist, in that some people will be better at it than others. Elitism as privilege for rich people is wrong; elitism as more recognition for better painters is not wrong. Both might be said to be "natural", but the first is not a proper foundation for society. People rarely get rich for being better people, for a start. And privilege and recognition are two different things. Better artwork must be more highly esteemed by any society, but this does not mean that the better artist needs to live or act like a lord. All this being true, art must still be concerned with quality. Quality is hierarchic and implies a sort of elite. Quality also requires a mastery of technique.

The Stuckists, often by their alliances, and sometimes by their bullet points, dismiss quality as a necessary feature of art. They have allied with the punks, who are fiercely anti-hierarchical, except in the strangest of ways. The Stuckists want a universal art, an art of the streets. Their manifestoes sometimes seem to encourage mainly art as therapy, a therapy in which "artist" is the universal

appellation by right. The Stuckist stresses that he embraces all those whom he attacks (though it is not clear in what form this embrace manifests itself). For me, it would seem to be more efficient to do one or the other (attack or embrace), but the Christian attitude is better suited to a movement that wants to form a universal brotherhood where everyone is an artist.

Universal brotherhoods are fine with me, but not everyone is an artist. We must create brotherhoods based on our common humanity, not on specific talents. It can only be further degrading to art to link it to politics, even the best of politics. Trading conceptual propaganda that props up capitalist markets for realist propaganda that underscores global fraternity is not worth pursuing.

Beyond this, the Stuckists need to spend less time writing manifestoes and more time learning to paint. Some of their work is cute in a childish way, but most is just awful. It has no hope of being a viable alternative to Modernism.

Now to switch gears and mention a few positive examples in the realist scene. In my opinion one of the finest figure painters under 50 is Ronald Sherr. If I had to hire someone to paint my portrait it would be Sherr. I would not change places with him for the world, but I find some of his work really smashing. I would not change places with him simply because I have no desire to paint presidents and other boring and corrupt people in suits. I have no desire to have 5-year backlogs of Republican CEO's and scary old ladies. I went a step or two down that road and ran screaming. But when the rich people leave him alone for a moment, Sherr really produces some beautiful things.



I first saw his work at the Hubbard competition, the prize that helped him get his start. His work there, though highly promising, was not fantastic. The gilding was interesting, and the painting was pretty, but it had some weaknesses, too. I was not at all sure that it was better than the Jamie Wyeth hanging nearby (Jamie doomed himself by asking \$300,000 for his painting, but saying that he was willing to accept the \$250,000 purchase prize). However, since then I have become convinced of Sherr's talent. His spread in *American Artist* a couple of years ago was very impressive. His painting of the oriental girl was daring in color and yet completely successful. The little boy's head was charming. Sherr has a huge talent. I hope he will soon make enough money to allow himself some time away from the

market, before he burns out. I want to see more experiments with oriental girls from him, and the like. I would be satisfied if I never saw another portrait of a man in a suit.

[Addendum, 4/27/05. I hate to undercut some of the only praise in this paper, but I just saw some recent drawings of Sherr at Edith Caldwell Gallery. Sherr is now doing very large pencil drawings of mannequins. What is the emotional draw of mannequins at this point in history? Has the whole world gone mad? Something very strange is going on here, but I will save it for another paper, one where I psycho-analyze the entire realistic impulse as it now manifests itself. Sounds like a page-turner, doesn't it?]



Yuqi Wang is another artist under 50 who has a huge talent. Unlike Sherr, Wang's talent is mostly being neglected. In a fair cosmos, he would be feted as one of the top five artists in the world. As it is, he is mostly unknown. His best works—that I know of—are *Year of the Dog*, *Autumn of Mountain*, *Kora*, and *Black Grass*. If Shanks' *Sophia* sold for a quarter million, *Year of the Dog* should be worth 5 million. If Jasper Johns' *Gray Numbers* is worth 40 million, then *Black Grass* is worth 40 billion. Unfortunately, Wang does not seem to want to paint like this anymore. I met him a couple of years ago and he appeared to want to go in another, less literal direction. Where he is now, creatively, I cannot say. But I can say that, based simply on the four works listed above, he has already earned a place in any of the finest American museums, museums who are fools not to pursue him. And I hope he will continue to provide the world with more works like these—there are far too few being painted, and not a handful who can paint them (if you think Shanks' hands are fine, check out Wang's—I will take the latter any day of the week). In fact, I will go out on a limb and state that there is *no one else* who can do



what Wang is doing. If he does not do it, it will not get done.



The greatest artist of the 20th century is Andrew Wyeth. Wyeth is not a New Realist, but he is a 20th century realist. I therefore include him here as our greatest living mentor. Wyeth is not the technical powerhouse that Nerdrum is, but he has two important qualities that Nerdrum apparently will never find: subtlety and focus. Wyeth has also never needed to call attention to himself. His name guaranteed him attention and he has only needed to follow his heart. What Wyeth has understood that almost no one else has—even those others from well-known families—is that painting is a form of direct communication. That is, it is an immediate emotional response, both by the artist when choosing the subject and by the viewer when looking at the painting. This response does not require huge canvases, bright colors, technical fireworks, clever juxtapositions, social-political or psychological ideas, literary content, winking at the critics, surreal effects, or ironic poses. It only requires capturing the subtle effect before you. Not an effect of light or composition only, but an effect of the presence of the person posing for you. This effect does not need to be amplified, but it should never be suppressed.





Some were shocked at the adulterous implications of his Helga series, but for true artists this was beside the point. It was clear at first glance that this series was not produced to provoke or titillate. If Wyeth was drawn to Helga mainly by desire, this was just as it should be. This was a genuine response to the world, at least. Here was an un-manufactured obsession. Here was emotional honesty, at long last. Here was the necessary conjunction of artistic skill and meaningful subject matter, so rarely achieved. From this series came several true masterpieces, the greatest for me being *Black Velvet*, *Cape Coat*, and *Braids*.

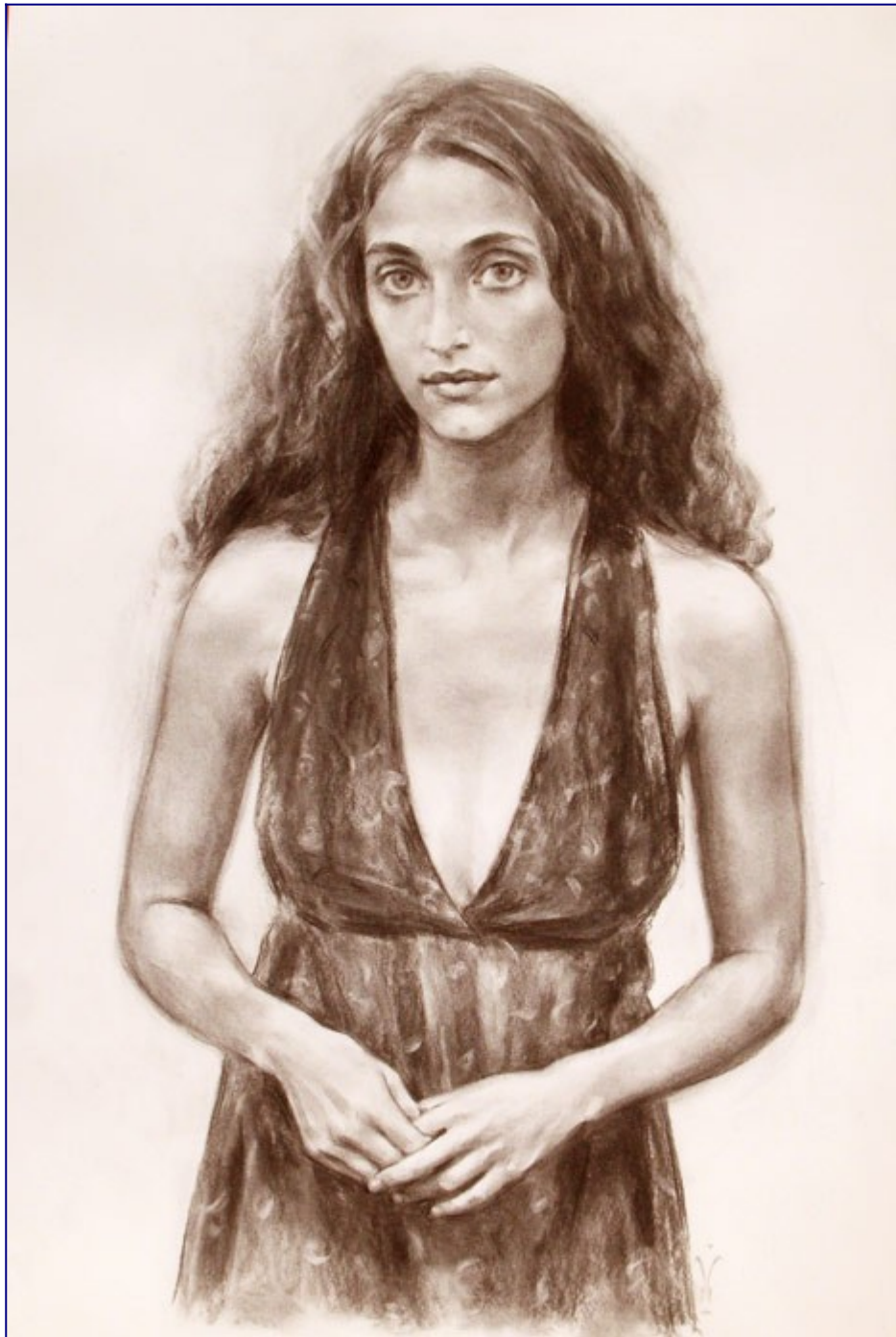
I have stated elsewhere that I wish Wyeth could be encouraged to speak out more, but the example he has set on canvas and paper has been strong and unwavering. Artists would do well to study it closely, to understand why smallish, single-figure, low-tone works can be the highest art. Wyeth makes his 20th century competitors look like ostentatious barbarians, loading themselves with jewels and gold and silks in order to make up for their coarseness. In Wyeth we have quietude and subtlety and restraint at the same time that we have the deepest and most honest emotions.

In closing, I will tie myself to this long commentary on realism. This paper has been my extended and rather late answer to Dan Gerhartz and to those who have been unable to see past or through my restrained technique. To those who found my colors drab, my compositions simple, my figures lonely, or my technique wanting in any other way, I suggest that they look again to see what is there rather than what is not there. If I have not painted exactly like other artists of my time, perhaps I have had a reason. If I have followed Van Dyck and Whistler and Wyeth and other low-toned artists, perhaps it was not because I could not afford large tubes of cadmium and cobalt or could not manage a full palette. If I pursued neither high finish nor an impressionistic brushwork, it was because I had a use for

neither. If I ignored the dictates of the market, it was not because I was a fool, but because I knew the market to be foolish.

I recognize as well as anyone the weaknesses in my own work, and know full well that some of the criticisms I have made in this paper apply to me as well as to those I criticize. Some of my works do not transcend illustration, some are technical failures. I wrote this paper not from any desire to hold myself up as the ultimate example of anything, but to counter the current trend of technical hyper-criticality and artistic non-criticality. To put it in a nutshell, the new realists tend to judge art solely or mainly by technical standards. They miss seeing that technique is just a means, and that a restrained technique is often a much keener artistic tool. All paintings should be judged first on their artistic success, and only afterwards on their technical success. These two successes are linked but are not the same. A painting with a lot of perfect technique can be awful, and a painting with very little noticeable technique can be perfect. Even a painting with some bad passages can be great, as the old masters have proved. The important things have to be right, but the rest can often vary to a great degree. The greatest artists are not the ones who polish up every square inch of a painting until it reflects like the sun or who pack their canvases with every species of cleverness known to art. They are the ones who know what their own best subjects are. They are the ones who know what the important things in a painting are—the ones they have to get right. And they know how to leave the rest as just a suggestion, so that the main theme is never obstructed by clutter or by-products or bragging. This is the upper level of technique, the synthesis of technique: a level few reach because few are taught that it exists.

*Rebecca sleeveless*



*charcoal*  
*28 x 20 in.*

[return to 2006](#)

# REDACTED!

*by Miles Mathis*



*by William Wegman*

In what must be one of the most important stories of the year, the *New York Times* printed [December 22, 2006] what they are calling a “redacted” op-ed piece by Flynt Leverett and Hillary Mann. This story is important not for what it says in the non-redacted lines, and not for what it says in the redacted lines (the information is unclassified and therefore may easily be found elsewhere). It is important for what it says between the lines.

Let me begin by circling one of the obvious things here. “Redacted” is just a polite or euphemistic term for CENSORED. Why did the *Times* so conspicuously avoid the obvious word? They were brave enough to point a finger, but not brave enough to use the right word. They were brave enough to give the hint, but not brave enough to sound the alarm.

The *Times* published a companion piece to this redacted op-ed by the authors claiming to explain the story in greater detail. To tell you what it really meant. This backstory is called, “What we wanted to tell you about Iran.” But even there they are being censored. Although they admit that the lost lines were “blackened out by the Central Intelligence Agency’s Publication Review Board after the White House intervened in the normal prepublication review process,” they do not stop to analyze this sentence. Instead they tell us, “as career civil servants in national security, for both Republican and Democratic administrations, we know firsthand the importance of protecting sensitive information.” They go on to make a small nod at the Constitution, but they don’t do it with much heat or gusto: “To classify information for reasons other than the safety and security of the United States and its interests is a violation of these principles.”

What principles do the authors mean? They are referring to principles just mentioned in preceding sentences: “National security must be above politics. In a democracy, transparency in government has to be honored and protected.” Those are the two “principles” they are referring to. But a closer reading must show that those two sentences are contradictory. The first says that national security is of primary importance. The second says that transparency in government is an important quality of democracy. Only the second could really be called a principle, and even then it is a pretty mushy wording. But the first sentence trumps that mushy principle anyway. The first sentence, which is a mantra of fascism not a principle of democracy or a principle at all, states a clear priority. National security comes first.

So, despite the authors’ apparently democratic conclusion, what they have really done is underline the mantra of the CIA. Two things are being said simultaneously, but it is clear which one must win.

Actually, the principle violated by censorship is neither of those two. It is the First Amendment of the Constitution, which states, “Congress shall make no law abridging the freedom of the press.” That is a direct quote. The First Amendment does not say that it is OK for the Executive or the CIA to make a law abridging the freedom of the press, not for reasons of national security or for any other reason. In fact, the Constitution specifically denies the power to make laws or regulate the press to the Executive or any other branch or organization. If Congress cannot censor the press, the Executive surely cannot.

The fact is, no policy information should be classified at all, ever. There is no good reason that any foreign or domestic policy or policy intention should be kept from the American people. Only information on troop movement, the location of warheads, the launch codes, and things of that nature should be classified. A very large percentage of classified information is classified simply in order to protect government officials from public oversight, and everybody knows that (or should know it, if they are awake). The really important things, like launch codes and troop movements, are not just classified, they are limited to a very small number of people. They couldn’t reach the *New York Times*

or even career civil servants. Do you think the launch codes aren't being published only because the CIA is allowed to pre-read all the major newspapers? The CIA doesn't know the launch codes, either (or it is to be hoped), so you see there must be other safeguards for real national security questions. Safeguards that predated both the CIA and the Bush administration. Safeguards that do not require shredding the First Amendment and allowing the Executive Branch to publish the news.

This country has a fairly long history, and much of that history predated the rise of the CIA. In that history, there has not been a major problem with newspapers maliciously printing genuine classified information. The reasons are obvious. We already had and have treason laws which address such a crime, and newspaper editors are not traitors. Newspapers *used* to look for real information, but they were never interested in printing launch codes or troop movements just to be clever. All this misdirection about classified information is just that: misdirection. It is the muzzling of the press under the cloak of national security. It is fascism, pure and simple.

But let us return to the backstory article, the one I have been quoting from. This article has obviously been rewritten as well. Instead of redacting it or censoring it, the CIA has added sentences. That is why that last paragraph doesn't make any sense. The CIA wanted to water it down, to spin it their way. But since they don't know how to write they just added a few sentences willy-nilly, as poor editors often will (and as I know firsthand). That is why you have two sentences right next to each other that say the opposite thing, and why the first sentence contradicts the entire paragraph it claims to lead. That sentence was added by the CIA.

National security must be above politics.

Leverett and Mann didn't write that. That poor pair are probably huddled in their little offices, wishing that the big editors at the *NYT* had never put them in this position. Given what we have left of their backstory, they don't seem too thrilled to have been redacted and thrust into the spotlight. They are a long way from being fighting mad, or even politely incensed, or even deeply offended. You must remember that, "Mr. Leverett has put more than 20 articles through the CIA's prepublication review process." He is used to the censorship. He is fine with it or he would be blogging away freely on the internet, saying whatever he wanted about Iran.

Which brings up another question. If the government doesn't want Leverett publishing these things, why not just take away his security clearance? Where is he getting this information? It is not old. It is not some information leftover from his time as an insider 20 years ago. This is current policy on Iran we are talking about. Leverett claims that this information is not classified. Why then are he and

Mann and the *NYT* allowing it to be censored? The CIA is censoring unclassified information and Leverett and Mann and the *NYT* are being “brave” enough to let us know. But how about just take one more step and be brave enough to do what you are legally allowed to do: publish it uncensored and stand up for your Constitutional rights. If the *NYT* can’t publish unclassified information, then we are in a police state.

Remember the line above, about the CIA’s “normal prepublication review process.” **The CIA has a normal prepublication review process.** Most will not even trip over that. In the article it is not underlined or highlighted or commented on, so many will not even soak it up. But think about it. What does that mean? Do you think patriotic writers like Leverett just volunteer to let the CIA proof their hottest papers for typos? “Oh, I mentioned something important here, I better run it by the CIA.” Of course not. It means that the CIA, under cover of the Patriot Act or Homeland Security, is now routinely rubberstamping all news. It is pre-reading everything you see. AOL, Yahoo, MSN, all the newspapers, including the smaller ones, the wire services, the TV stations, everything.

And **that**, my friends, is what is written in between the lines here, in both the redacted op-ed and in the backstory. These authors and their publishers are telling us that they are *afraid* to publish normal, unclassified information. They are legally allowed to do it, but they are not doing it, which must mean they are being coerced into not doing it. Which means they are being threatened. They are not being threatened legally, since the CIA has no legal way to stop newspapers from printing unclassified information. Which means they are being threatened physically.

Please re-read the articles and try to understand what these people are telling you. This is a cry for help from hostages. Leverett and Mann may or may not be fairly willing hostages, but the editors who decided to run this piece redacted are not.

# The Philosophy of Yoga

*by Miles Mathis*

Although I have tried yoga several times over the years, I have only recently become addicted. I am now past 45, and I live in a cold climate, so I was experiencing some circulation problems in my hands and feet in the winter. Basically too much sugar and too much sitting. So I ditched the sugar and enrolled in a local yoga class. I tend to be a bit obsessive, and I found I was soon up to three or four classes a week. Since I have some gymnastics and ballet in my background, I was already predisposed to stretching and balancing and so on, and I progressed very quickly. That ability was part of the addiction, I suppose, but a greater part came from the artistic elements of yoga. I discovered that what appealed to me about yoga was more the visual and tactile and sensual aspect than the spiritual aspect. As with Catholicism, the real beauty for me was in the beauty, rather than in the enlightenment or the awakening (more on that later).

Of course beauty is its own sort of enlightenment and awakening, but the philosophy of yoga is not sold in those terms, neither in the east nor in the west. It is true that American yoga is often a pale reflection of Indian yoga, and may even be a terrible bastardization of it, but what I will say here applies to both.

Yes, I have just switched from an addiction to a critique, which may seem like a reversal, but it is quite easy to be addicted to a thing you don't fully trust, or to critique a thing you love. In fact, a critique may be the greatest sign of love.

Yoga has gotten very popular, and it has achieved this popularity for many good reasons. It is a great form of exercise, since unlike most western exercise, it is well-rounded, it includes very large doses of stretching, it teaches breathing, and it embraces the sensual side of motion. Beyond that, it is artistic in the sense that it pays attention to surroundings: wooden floors and ceilings, candles, light, heat, decorations, clothing, and so on. This is where I compare it Catholicism. It is careful to create a proper mood. The Americans need to get rid of their PVC mats and foam blocks, but other than that, yoga tends to remain a very eastern exercise in its attention to detail.

Yoga is also artistic, by my personal definition, in that mixed exercise is a delight for the eyes. In the west, yoga and yoga classes are dominated by women. In my experience, the ratio of women to men tends to be at least 4 to 1. That is a ratio I like. It is always a spiritual blessing, come what may, to be surrounded by females. To be involved in a common motion makes it that much more soothing to man's spirit, even if the bodies are separated by many feet. In the east they can admit these things without blush, but here in the west I am in danger of being tagged a pervert by putting it in print. It is this fear of feeling what you feel that prevents more western men from doing yoga, in my opinion. The ladies think it is because men are afraid of being seen as sissy, but it isn't that. It is that most men really are



too sissy to mix with women on their own turf. Men are afraid to be outnumbered, lest they find themselves in a situation where they lose control of their eyes. As for me, I let my eyes go where they like. The truth is, the modern woman is so into herself she doesn't even know you have eyes. You could be naked, painted red, and on fire, and she wouldn't notice or care.

There is also a great emphasis on relaxation in western yoga, perhaps more than in eastern, and I have no real quibble with that. In the east, the going-in is thought of in more religious terms, but in the west we tend to have different needs. It is not that we don't need the deeper aspects, it is that what we need first is to turn off the constant din of input. Most western people are in a constant society and a constant socializing and a constant doing. Therefore, their primary need from yoga is a non-doing. The breath is used to take them away from the western world.

Again, nothing wrong with that. But I have an ongoing mental tussle with my teachers, since unlike most westerners, I don't need that. I am alone all day, I sleep vast amounts, I enjoy all the quietude one man can ask for, and I am a master of non-doing. So when I come to class the last thing I need is to waste time in shavasana. I am in shavasana almost all the time. I don't mind the chanting and ohming, since singing in company is always good for the spirit. But shavasana just irks me. Not because I am so western and controlling and hyper-active, but because I am the opposite of those things. My teachers have not spent a day with me and can't understand that. They assume that because I am an American, I have standard American needs.

That said, I am aware that I would be seen as even more insubordinate in the east. There, the relationship is more severely and traditionally a master/student relationship, and a student is not seen as having the right to have personal needs. Personal needs are an idiosyncrasy to be jettisoned at the door. So in complaint against western practice I am not claiming superiority of eastern. I have strong intuition they are both wrong for me in that regard.

Which brings us to the real reason I wrote this paper. All I have said up to now is but an introduction and anecdote. The greater problem I have with the philosophy of yoga has nothing to do with east or west, or with any personal need of mine. In a more fundamental way, I intuit that yoga cannot provide the enlightenment it promises. You will say that this is a big statement from someone who is just a beginner, but the fact is, I am not just a beginner in either life or enlightenment. I am now past middle age, and I have spent my life studying everything that came my way. I have read the major eastern texts and have studied the specific texts of yoga. I have never been drawn to them, and I will tell you why.

On the lowest level, it is because enlightenment cannot be achieved through physical exercise of any kind, no matter how perfect or advanced. A perfect physical exercise like yoga is one of the requirements, no doubt, but it is insufficient on its own. This is generally understood, even in the west, but in practice most yogis and yoginis spend too much time studying themselves and too little time studying the world. This is true both east and west, since the subtlest eastern adepts and texts teach that breath and meditation are to be used to escape the world. You are taught to block out your own

thoughts and emotions and to instead focus on the eternal and inanimate and unthinking. As a short-term cure of over-action or anxiety, this is fine, as I said, but as a road to enlightenment it is a road to nowhere.

On a middle level, I have not been drawn to eastern religious texts, since I saw no point in exchanging one illogic for another. Like many, I have struggled to free myself from the nastier confines of western religions, and had no desire to exchange one narrow chamber for another, one compression tank for another. This seemed to me like digging out of a cave only to seek another smaller cave. Most religions have their good points as well as their bad, and I am not trying to sell atheism or agnosticism here, but unlike many, I did not feel much of a void at the loss of Christianity. I was in no hurry to replace it with Buddhism.

On a higher level, yoga on the mat is supplemented with readings from various texts and with other disciplines of the mind and body. But the texts of yoga and Hinduism and Buddhism are fairly narrow, in the way that the Bible is narrow. All the physical and mental discipline in the world must be in service of something, and it is not clear to me that that something has been discovered in any of the eastern texts. It has not been discovered in any of the western texts either (and the more modern a text the less likely it is to be of any use). But my point is that true enlightenment will come, if it ever does come, from a wider reading and a wider experience. I am not contradicting Thoreau and claiming that one needs to travel the globe for enlightenment, but one must travel through and over and around great sources of information, one way or another. Whatever else it may be, the Bible is only one book. Whatever the merits of Buddhism or Hinduism, they are only the limited teachings of a limited people. Their own adepts knew that, and enlightenment, if it meant anything, meant the recognition that there were no limits on questioning and answering.

But enlightenment, as a goal, has never much impressed me, either. It is like its western counterpart: happiness. In my opinion, an enlightened person does not seek enlightenment. Perhaps that is a zen koan, perhaps not, but enlightenment and happiness are both selfish and shallow goals. A wise person seeks to do something that needs to be done. He or she seeks significant action.

Let us take a trivial and fictional and contemporary example, to prevent bias. Let us take Gandalf or Yoda as our guru, and ask what place “enlightenment” has in our description. Both may be said to be powerful because they are enlightened, but the enlightenment is a rather vague characteristic, is it not? Do you think either Gandalf himself, his controlling or leading gods, or any of the surrounding characters found any value or enjoyment in his enlightenment? No, if anyone finds Gandalf of any use, it is for his actions or his words or his presence. Beyond that, it is difficult to imagine Gandalf or Yoda studying for centuries or millennia to achieve enlightenment. Enlightenment was a side-effect of their journey, not the goal of the journey.

I speak here in very bald terms, purposely without the usual religious or philosophic fluff, because I believe all this is comprehensible to all, even those furthest from enlightenment. You don't have to be

especially well-read to understand that happiness is not a lofty goal. You don't have to be a shaman to perceive that enlightenment is an adjective that applies to the self and the self alone. Wisdom or action can affect others, but only "I" am enlightened.

If we apply that to yoga, we find that the recommendation to flee the world and your own thoughts is counterproductive, either to action or enlightenment. Meditation of any kind should not be the banishment of thought, it should be the sharpening of thought. Most people need to think *more*, not less. Yes, they need to think less about shopping and paying the bills and soap operas and politics and so on, but they do not need to think less in general. When they are finished with their perfect exercise on the mat, they need to stare at the ceiling and turn their thoughts *on*, not off. But they need to direct these thoughts to significant things. That is why they must read significant texts. These texts give them things to think about. It is sorting through these texts and thoughts that will make them wise, and that wisdom will make them powerful. It will make them capable of significant action.

It used to be said that a man could learn everything he needs to know from the Bible. But while the Bible certainly contains a wealth of information, and a man is better off reading it than not, a person who read only the Bible would still be a narrow and pinched sort of person. This applies equally to the Vedas or the Upanishads or the Ramayana or the Koran or any other book. All the religious texts of the world should be read and studied, but the world was always broader than that. These days, there is no excuse for any sort of seeker not to study as widely as possible, since it is so easy to do so. There is hardly any reason to stare at the ceiling and think of Oprah or the Olympics, when better mental fare is just down the road at the public library, or a click away online. Any man or woman who claims to seek enlightenment but doesn't have a pile of books in his or her bed is a faker (not a fakir, but a faker). If you don't have to move a stack of papers to get to your mat, you are on the wrong road.

And this is where the Bible and other religious texts can get in the way, since those who read them often seem to come under the impression that certain rows at the library are unrequired or useless or harmful. Any row at the library, aye, any book, chosen at random, will be more useful to you and less harmful than what you are likely reading now, and the dustier the book is, the bigger my wager on this. Biography, history, poetry, science, novels (the older the better), art books, actual religious texts (not commentary on them): anything is better than reading bestsellers, or reading nothing.

This is what galls me most about yoga, perhaps: seeing an emphasis on eastern religious and pseudo-religious texts when the west has the greatest wealth of literature, by far. Westerners now commonly know nothing about their own history and literature, but they have been convinced by the failures of contemporary western society that this history is not worth looking at. Or, in most cases, it is even shallower than that: they have been convinced by contemporary publishing frauds that eastern literature is deeper or more altruistic or less capitalistic. Eastern literature is less capitalistic, certainly, but for the rest, the sales pitch is hollow. There is nothing especially altruistic about navel-gazing or personal quests or even enlightenment. Besides, the east has had its share of empires and dictators and Khans. Its literature is just as full of glorifications of war. Its religious texts are just as illogical and contradictory